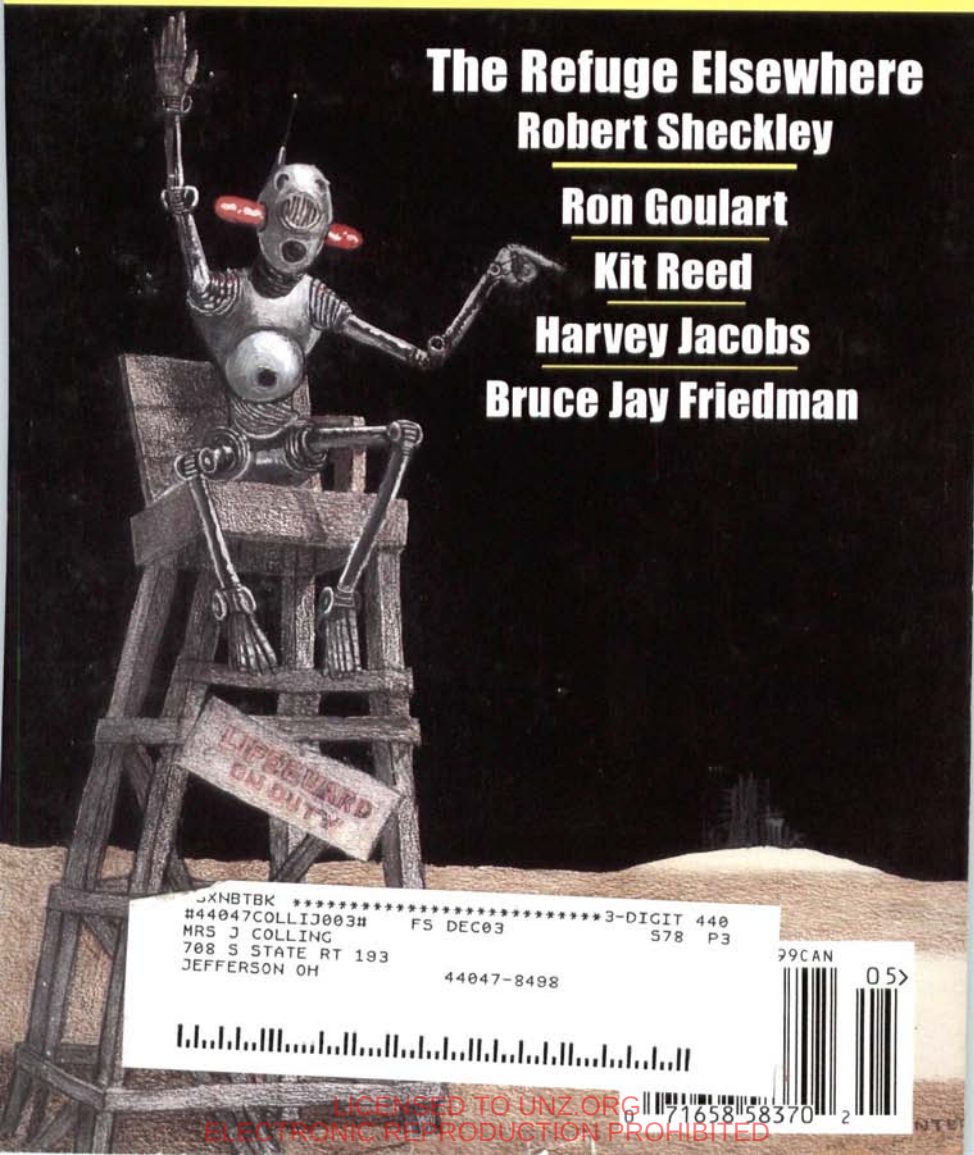
Ellen Klages: Basement Magic

Fantasy & Science Fiction

MAY



The Refuge Elsewhere
Robert Sheckley

Ron Goulart

Kit Reed

Harvey Jacobs

Bruce Jay Friedman

JXNBTBK **********3-DIGIT 440
#44047COLLIJ003# FS DEC03 S78 P3
MRS J COLLING
708 S STATE RT 193
JEFFERSON OH 44047-8498

99CAN 05>

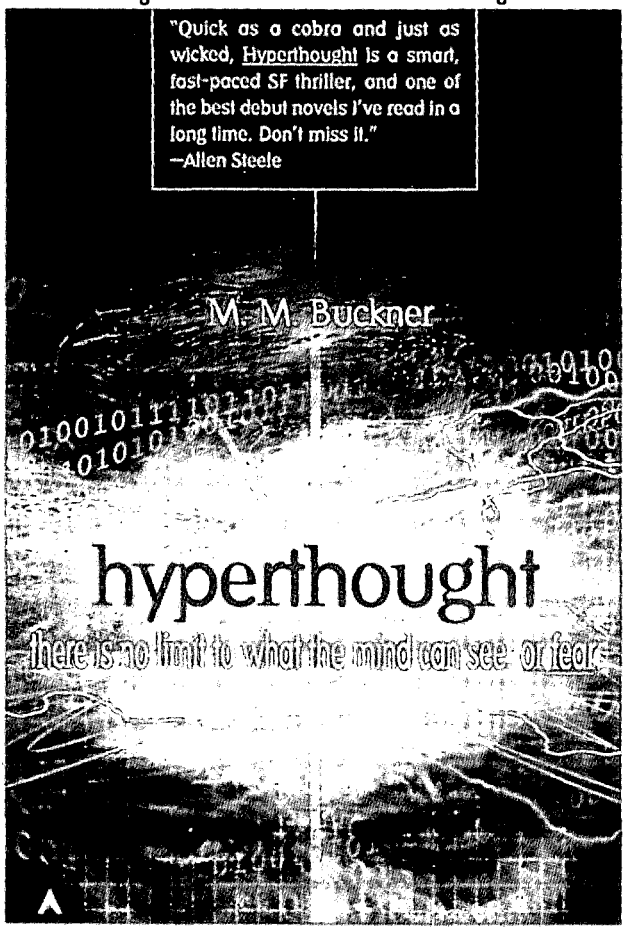
71658 58370 2

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

STORM-BLASTED. OVERHEATED. UNLIVABLE.

This is Earth, 2125.

Salvation is locked inside the human brain, but...
Can humanity achieve its intellectual breakthrough in time?


"Quick as a cobra and just as wicked, Hyperthought is a smart, fast-paced SF thriller, and one of the best debut novels I've read in a long time. Don't miss it."
—Allen Steele
M. M. Buckner
hyperthought
there is no limit to what the mind can see or fear

Available now from ACE • www.mmbuckner.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy & Science Fiction
May • 54th Year of Publication

NOVELETS

BASEMENT MAGIC 4 **Ellen Klages**
THE REFUGE ELSEWHERE 137 **Robert Sheckley**

SHORT STORIES

PROTECT YOURSELF AT ALL TIMES 41 **Bruce Jay Friedman**
THE INCREDIBLE STEAM MAN 47 **Ron Goulart**
LUZ 68 **Arthur Porges**
INCURSIONS 79 **Kit Reed**
THE CURSE OF THE VON KRUMPELSTEINS AND OTHER HORRORS: CONTENTS OF VOLUME I 92 **John Morressy**
THE RETRIEVER 99 **Harvey Jacobs**
555 124 **Robert Reed**

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR 32 **Charles de Lint**
BOOKS 36 **James Sallis**
FILMS: AND A LITTLE CG SHALL LEAD THEM 74 **Kathi Maio**
A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK: LAST THINGS 112 **Gregory Benford**
COMING ATTRACTIONS 160
CURIOSITIES 162 **Jack Williamson**

CARTOONS: Tom Cheney (31, 91), Arthur Masear (67), B. Boyle (78), S. Harris (136), Joseph Farris (163).
COVER BY MEL HUNTER

GORDON VAN GELDER, Publisher/Editor — BARBARA J. NORTON, Assistant Publisher
ROBIN O'CONNOR, Assistant Editor — KEITH KAHLA, Assistant Publisher
HARLAN ELLISON, Film Editor — JOHN J. ADAMS, Editorial Assistant

The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 1095-8258), Volume 104, No. 5, Whole No. 617, May 2003. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Spilogale, Inc. at $3.99 per copy. Annual subscription $44.89; $54.89 outside of the U.S. Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Publication office, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Periodical postage paid at Hoboken, NJ 07030, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A.
Copyright © 2003 by Spilogale, Inc. All rights reserved.
Distributed by Curtis Circulation Co., 730 River Rd. New Milford, NJ 07646.
GENERAL AND EDITORIAL OFFICE: PO BOX 3447, HOBOKEN, NJ 07030
www.fsfmag.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ellen Klages has collaborated with our science columnist Pat Murphy and others on four books of hands-on science activities for the Exploratorium museum in San Francisco. Her short fiction has been published previously in Bending the Landscape, Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet, *and* Strange Horizons, *and has garnered nominations for the Nebula, Hugo, Campbell, and Spectrum Awards. She is currently working on a YA novel about the Manhattan Project. Her first story for us is a Cinderella tale for the Space Age.*

Basement Magic

By Ellen Klages

MARY LOUISE WHITTAKER believes in magic. She knows that somewhere, somewhere else, there must be dragons and princes, wands and wishes. Especially wishes. And happily ever after. Ever after is not now.

Her mother died in a car accident when Mary Louise was still a toddler. She misses her mother fiercely but abstractly. Her memories are less a coherent portrait than a mosaic of disconnected details: soft skin that smelled of lavender; a bright voice singing "Sweet and Low" in the night darkness; bubbles at bath time; dark curls; zwieback.

Her childhood has been kneaded, but not shaped, by the series of well-meaning middle-aged women her father has hired to tend her. He is busy climbing the corporate ladder, and is absent even when he is at home. She does not miss him. He remarried when she was five, and they moved into a two-story Tudor in one of the better suburbs of Detroit. Kitty, the new Mrs. Ted Whittaker, is a former Miss Bloomfield Hills, a vain divorcée with a towering mass of blond curls in a shade not her own. In the wild, her kind is inclined to eat their young.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kitty might have tolerated her new stepdaughter had she been sweet and cuddly, a slick-magazine cherub. But at six, Mary Louise is an odd, solitary child. She has unruly red hair the color of Fiestaware, the dishes that might have been radioactive, and small round pink glasses that make her blue eyes seem large and slightly distant. She did not walk until she was almost two, and propels herself with a quick shuffle-duckling gait that is both urgent and awkward.

One spring morning, Mary Louise is camped in one of her favorite spots, the window seat in the guest bedroom. It is a stage set of a room, one that no one else ever visits. She leans against the wall, a thick book with lush illustrations propped up on her bare knees. Bright sunlight, filtered through the leaves of the oak outside, is broken into geometric patterns by the mullioned windows, dappling the floral cushion in front of her.

The book is almost bigger than her lap, and she holds it open with one elbow, the other anchoring her Bankie, a square of pale blue flannel with pale blue satin edging that once swaddled her infant self, carried home from the hospital. It is raveled and graying, both tattered and beloved. The thumb of her blanket arm rests in her mouth in a comforting manner.

Mary Louise is studying a picture of a witch with purple robes and hair as black as midnight when she hears voices in the hall. The door to the guest room is open a crack, so she can hear clearly, but cannot see or be seen. One of the voices is Kitty's. She is explaining something about the linen closet, so it is probably a new cleaning lady. They have had six since they moved in.

Mary Louise sits very still and doesn't turn the page, because it is stiff paper and might make a noise. But the door opens anyway, and she hears Kitty say, "This is the guest room. Now unless we've got company — and I'll let you know — it just needs to be dusted and the linens aired once a week. It has an — oh, there you are," she says, coming in the doorway, as if she has been looking all over for Mary Louise, which she has not.

Kitty turns and says to the air behind her, "This is my husband's daughter, Mary Louise. She's not in school yet. She's small for her age, and her birthday is in December, so we decided to hold her back a year. She never does much, just sits and reads. I'm sure she won't be a bother. Will you?" She turns and looks at Mary Louise but does not wait for an answer. "And this is Ruby. She's going to take care of the house for us."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The woman who stands behind Kitty nods, but makes no move to enter the room. She is tall, taller than Kitty, with skin the color of gingerbread. Ruby wears a white uniform and a pair of white Keds. She is older, there are lines around her eyes and her mouth, but her hair is sleek and black, black as midnight.

Kitty looks at her small gold watch. "Oh, dear. I've got to get going or I'll be late for my hair appointment." She looks back at Mary Louise. "Your father and I are going out tonight, but Ruby will make you some dinner, and Mrs. Banks will be here about six." Mrs. Banks is one of the babysitters, an older woman in a dark dress who smells like dusty licorice and coos too much. "So be a good girl. And for god's sake get that thumb out of your mouth. Do you want your teeth to grow in crooked, too?"

Mary Louise says nothing, but withdraws her damp puckered thumb and folds both hands in her lap. She looks up at Kitty, her eyes expressionless, until her stepmother looks away. "Well, an-y-wa-y," Kitty says, drawing the word out to four syllables, "I've really got to be going." She turns and leaves the room, brushing by Ruby, who stands silently just outside the doorway.

Ruby watches Kitty go, and when the high heels have clattered onto the tiles at the bottom of the stairs, she turns and looks at Mary Louise. "You a quiet little mouse, ain't you?" she asks in a soft, low voice.

Mary Louise shrugs. She sits very still in the window seat and waits for Ruby to leave. She does not look down at her book, because it is rude to look away when a grownup might still be talking to you. But none of the cleaning ladies talk to her, except to ask her to move out of the way, as if she were furniture.

"Yes siree, a quiet little mouse," Ruby says again. "Well, Miss Mouse, I'm fixin to go downstairs and make me a grilled cheese sandwich for lunch. If you like, I can cook you up one too. I make a mighty fine grilled cheese sandwich."

Mary Louise is startled by the offer. Grilled cheese is one of her very favorite foods. She thinks for a minute, then closes her book and tucks Bankie securely under one arm. She slowly follows Ruby down the wide front stairs, her small green-socked feet making no sound at all on the thick beige carpet.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It is the best grilled cheese sandwich Mary Louise has ever eaten. The outside is golden brown and so crisp it crackles under her teeth. The cheese is melted so that it soaks into the bread on the inside, just a little. There are no burnt spots at all. Mary Louise thanks Ruby and returns to her book.

The house is large, and Mary Louise knows all the best hiding places. She does not like being where Kitty can find her, where their paths might cross. Before Ruby came, Mary Louise didn't go down to the basement very much. Not by herself. It is an old house, and the basement is damp and musty, with heavy stone walls and banished, battered furniture. It is not a comfortable place, nor a safe one. There is the furnace, roaring fire, and the cans of paint and bleach and other frightful potions. Poisons. Years of soap flakes, lint, and furnace soot coat the walls like household lichen.

The basement is a place between the worlds, within Kitty's domain, but beneath her notice. Now, in the daytime, it is Ruby's, and Mary Louise is happy there. Ruby is not like other grownups. Ruby talks to her in a regular voice, not a scold, nor the singsong Mrs. Banks uses, as if Mary Louise is a tiny baby. Ruby lets her sit and watch while she irons, or sorts the laundry, or runs the sheets through the mangle. She doesn't sigh when Mary Louise asks her questions.

On the rare occasions when Kitty and Ted are home in the evening, they have dinner in the dining room. Ruby cooks. She comes in late on those days, and then is very busy, and Mary Louise does not get to see her until dinnertime. But the two of them eat in the kitchen, in the breakfast nook. Ruby tells stories, but has to get up every few minutes when Kitty buzzes for her, to bring more water or another fork, or to clear away the salad plates. Ruby smiles when she is talking to Mary Louise, but when the buzzer sounds, her face changes. Not to a frown, but to a kind of blank Ruby mask.

One Tuesday night in early May, Kitty decrees that Mary Louise will eat dinner with them in the dining room, too. They sit at the wide mahogany table on stiff brocade chairs that pick at the backs of her legs. There are too many forks and even though she is very careful, it is hard to cut her meat, and once the heavy silverware skitters across the china with a sound that sets her teeth on edge. Kitty frowns at her.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The grownups talk to each other and Mary Louise just sits. The worst part is that when Ruby comes in and sets a plate down in front of her, there is no smile, just the Ruby mask.

"I don't know how you do it, Ruby," says her father when Ruby comes in to give him a second glass of water. "These pork chops are the best I've ever eaten. You've certainly got the magic touch."

"She does, doesn't she?" says Kitty. "You must tell me your secret."

"Just shake 'em up in flour, salt and pepper, then fry 'em in Crisco," Ruby says.

"That's all?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, isn't that marvelous. I must try that. Thank you Ruby. You may go now."

"Yes, ma'am." Ruby turns and lets the swinging door between the kitchen and the dining room close behind her. A minute later Mary Louise hears the sound of running water, and the soft clunk of plates being slotted into the racks of the dishwasher.

"Mary Louise, don't put your peas into your mashed potatoes that way. It's not polite to play with your food," Kitty says.

Mary Louise sighs. There are too many rules in the dining room.

"Mary Louise, answer me when I speak to you."

"Muhff-mum," Mary Louise says through a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

"Oh, for god's sake. Don't talk with your mouth full. Don't you have any manners at all?"

Caught between two conflicting rules, Mary Louise merely shrugs.

"Is there any more gravy?" her father asks.

Kitty leans forward a little and Mary Louise hears the slightly muffled sound of the buzzer in the kitchen. There is a little bump, about the size of an Oreo, under the carpet just beneath Kitty's chair that Kitty presses with her foot. Ruby appears a few seconds later and stands inside the doorway, holding a striped dishcloth in one hand.

"Mr. Whittaker would like some more gravy," says Kitty.

Ruby shakes her head. "Sorry, Miz Whittaker. I put all of it in the gravy boat. There's no more left."

"Oh." Kitty sounds disapproving. "We had plenty of gravy last time."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes, ma'am. But that was a beef roast. Pork chops just don't make as much gravy," Ruby says.

"Oh. Of course. Well, thank you, Ruby."

"Yes ma'am." Ruby pulls the door shut behind her.

"I guess that's all the gravy, Ted," Kitty says, even though he is sitting at the other end of the table, and has heard Ruby himself.

"Tell her to make more next time," he says frowning. "So what did you do today?" He turns his attention to Mary Louise for the first time since they sat down.

"Mostly I read my book," she says. "The fairy tales you gave me for Christmas."

"Well, that's fine," he says. "I need you to call the Taylors and cancel." Mary Louise realizes he is no longer talking to her, and eats the last of her mashed potatoes.

"Why?" Kitty raises an eyebrow. "I thought we were meeting them out at the club on Friday for cocktails."

"Can't. Got to fly down to Florida tomorrow. The space thing. We designed the guidance system for Shepard's capsule, and George wants me to go down with the engineers, talk to the press if the launch is a success."

"Are they really going to shoot a man into space?" Mary Louise asks.

"That's the plan, honey."

"Well, you don't give me much notice," Kitty says, smiling. "But I suppose I can pack a few summer dresses, and get anything else I need down there."

"Sorry, Kit. This trip is just business. No wives."

"No, only to Grand Rapids. Never to Florida," Kitty says, frowning. She takes a long sip of her drink. "So how long will you be gone?"

"Five days, maybe a week. If things go well, Jim and I are going to drive down to Palm Beach and get some golf in."

"I see. Just business." Kitty drums her lacquered fingernails on the tablecloth. "I guess that means I have to call Barb and Mitchell, too. Or had you forgotten my sister's birthday dinner next Tuesday?" Kitty scowls down the table at her husband, who shrugs and takes a bite of his chop.

Kitty drains her drink. The table is silent for a minute, and then she says, "Mary Louise! Don't put your dirty fork on the tablecloth. Put it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

on the edge of your plate if you're done. Would you like to be excused?"

"Yes ma'am," says Mary Louise.

As soon as she is excused, Mary Louise goes down to the basement to wait. When Ruby is working it smells like a cave full of soap and warm laundry.

A little after seven, Ruby comes down the stairs carrying a brown paper lunch sack. She puts it down on the ironing board. "Well, Miss Mouse. I thought I'd see you down here when I got done with the dishes."

"I don't like eating in the dining room," Mary Louise says. "I want to eat in the kitchen with you."

"I like that, too. But your stepmomma says she got to teach you some table manners, so when you grow up you can eat with nice folks."

Mary Louise makes a face, and Ruby laughs.

"They ain't such a bad thing, manners. Come in real handy someday, when you're eatin with folks you *want* to have like you."

"I guess so," says Mary Louise. "Will you tell me a story?"

"Not tonight, Miss Mouse. It's late, and I gotta get home and give my husband his supper. He got off work half an hour ago, and I told him I'd bring him a pork chop or two if there was any left over." She gestures to the paper bag. "He likes my pork chops even more than your daddy does."

"Not even a little story?" Mary Louise feels like she might cry. Her stomach hurts from having dinner with all the forks.

"Not tonight, sugar. Tomorrow, though, I'll tell you a long one, just to make up." Ruby takes off her white Keds and lines them up next to each other under the big galvanized sink. Then she takes off her apron, looks at a brown gravy stain on the front of it, and crumples it up and tosses it into the pink plastic basket of dirty laundry. She pulls a hanger from the line that stretches across the ceiling over the washer and begins to undo the white buttons on the front of her uniform.

"What's that?" Mary Louise asks. Ruby has rucked the top of her uniform down to her waist and is pulling it over her hips. There is a green string pinned to one bra strap. The end of it disappears into her left armpit.

"What's what? You seen my underwear before."

"Not that. That string."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ruby looks down at her chest. "Oh. That. I had my auntie make me up a conjure hand."

"Can I see it?" Mary Louise climbs down out of the chair and walks over to where Ruby is standing.

Ruby looks hard at Mary Louise for a minute. "For it to work, it gotta stay a secret. But you good with secrets, so I guess you can take a look. Don't you touch it, though. Anybody but me touch it, all the conjure magic leak right out and it won't work no more." She reaches under her armpit and draws out a small green flannel bag, about the size of a walnut, and holds it in one hand.

Mary Louise stands with her hands clasped tight behind her back so she won't touch it even by accident and stares intently at the bag. It doesn't look like anything magic. Magic is gold rings and gowns spun of moonlight and silver, not a white cotton uniform and a little stained cloth bag. "Is it really magic? Really? What does it do?"

"Well, there's diff'rent kinds of magic. Some conjure bags bring luck. Some protects you. This one, this one gonna bring me money. That's why it's green. Green's the money color. Inside there's a silver dime, so the money knows it belong here, a magnet — that attracts the money right to me — and some roots, wrapped up in a two-dollar bill. Every mornin I gives it a little drink, and after nine days, it gonna bring me my fortune." Ruby looks down at the little bag fondly, then tucks it back under her armpit.

Mary Louise looks up at Ruby and sees something she has never seen on a grownup's face before: Ruby believes. She believes in magic, even if it is armpit magic.

"Wow. How does — "

"Miss Mouse, I *got* to get home, give my husband his supper." Ruby steps out of her uniform, hangs it on a hanger, then puts on her blue skirt and a cotton blouse.

Mary Louise looks down at the floor. "Okay," she says.

"It's not the end of the world, sugar." Ruby pats Mary Louise on the back of the head, then sits down and puts on her flat black shoes. "I'll be back tomorrow. I got a big pile of laundry to do. You think you might come down here, keep me company? I think I can tell a story and sort the laundry at the same time." She puts on her outdoor coat, a nubby, burnt-orange

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wool with chipped gold buttons and big square pockets, and ties a scarf around her chin.

"Will you tell me a story about the magic bag?" Mary Louise asks. This time she looks at Ruby and smiles.

"I think I can do that. Gives us both somethin to look forward to. Now scoot on out of here. I gotta turn off the light." She picks up her brown paper sack and pulls the string that hangs down over the ironing board. The light bulb goes out, and the basement is dark except for the twilight filtering in through the high single window. Ruby opens the outside door to the concrete stairs that lead up to the driveway. The air is warmer than the basement.

"Nitey, nite, Miss Mouse," she says, and goes outside.

"G'night Ruby," says Mary Louise, and goes upstairs.

WHEN RUBY GOES to vacuum the rug in the guest bedroom on Thursday morning, she finds Mary Louise sitting in the window seat, staring out the window.

"Mornin, Miss Mouse. You didn't come down and say hello."

Mary Louise does not answer. She does not even turn around.

Ruby pushes the lever on the vacuum and stands it upright, dropping the gray fabric cord she has wrapped around her hand. She walks over to the silent child. "Miss Mouse? Somethin wrong?"

Mary Louise looks up. Her eyes are cold. "Last night I was in bed, reading. Kitty came home. She was in a really bad mood. She told me I read too much and I'll just ruin my eyes — more — reading in bed. She took my book and told me she was going to throw it in the 'cinerator and burn it up." She delivers the words in staccato anger, through clenched teeth.

"She just bein mean to you, sugar." Ruby shakes her head. "She tryin to scare you, but she won't really do that."

"But she *did!*" Mary Louise reaches behind her and holds up her fairy tale book. The picture on the cover is soot-stained, the shiny coating blistered. The gilded edges of the pages are charred and the corners are gone.

"Lord, child, where'd you find that?"

"In the 'cinerator, out back. Where she said. I can still read most of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stories, but it makes my hands all dirty." She holds up her hands, showing her sooty palms.

Ruby shakes her head again. She says, more to herself than to Mary Louise, "I burnt the trash after lunch yesterday. Must of just been coals, come last night."

Mary Louise looks at the ruined book in her lap, then up at Ruby. "It was my favorite book. Why'd she do that?" A tear runs down her cheek.

Ruby sits down on the window seat. "I don't know, Miss Mouse," she says. "I truly don't. Maybe she mad that your daddy gone down to Florida, leave her behind. Some folks, when they're mad, they just gotta whup on somebody, even if it's a little bitty six-year-old child. They whup on somebody else, they forget their own hurts for a while."

"You're bigger than her," says Mary Louise, snuffling. "You could — whup — *her* back. You could tell her that it was bad and wrong what she did."

Ruby shakes her head. "I'm real sorry, Miss Mouse," she says quietly, "But I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"'Cause she the boss in this house, and if I say anythin crosswise to Miz Kitty, her own queen self, she gonna fire me same as she fire all them other colored ladies used to work for her. And I needs this job. My husband's just workin part-time down to the Sunoco. He tryin to get work in the Ford plant, but they ain't hirin right now. So my paycheck here, that's what's puttin groceries on our table."

"But, but — " Mary Louise begins to cry without a sound. Ruby is the only grownup person she trusts, and Ruby cannot help her.

Ruby looks down at her lap for a long time, then sighs. "I can't say nothin to Miz Kitty. But her bein so mean to you, that ain't right, neither." She puts her arm around the shaking child.

"What about your little bag?" Mary Louise wipes her nose with the back of her hand, leaving a small streak of soot on her cheek.

"What 'bout it?"

"You said some magic is for protecting, didn't you?"

"Some is," Ruby says slowly. "Some is. Now, my momma used to say, 'an egg can't fight with a stone.' And that's the truth. Miz Kitty got the power in this house. More'n you, more'n me. Ain't nothin to do 'bout that.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But conjurin — " She thinks for a minute, then lets out a deep breath.

"I think we might could put some protection 'round you, so Miz Kitty can't do you no more misery," Ruby says, frowning a little. "But I ain't sure quite how. See, if it was your house, I'd put a goopher right under the front door. But it ain't. It's your daddy's house, and she married to him legal, so ain't no way to keep her from comin in her own house, even if she is nasty."

"What about my room?" asks Mary Louise.

"Your room? Hmm. Now, that's a different story. I think we can goopher it so she can't do you no harm in there."

Mary Louise wrinkles her nose. "What's a *goopher*?"

Ruby smiles. "Down South Carolina, where my family's from, that's just what they calls a spell, or a hex, a little bit of rootwork."

"Root — ?"

Ruby shakes her head. "It don't make no never mind what you calls it, long as you does it right. Now if you done cryin, we got work to do. Can you go out to the garage, to your Daddy's toolbox, and get me nine nails? Big ones, all the same size, and bright and shiny as you can find. Can you count that many?"

Mary Louise snorts. "I can count up to *fifty*," she says.

"Good. Then you go get nine shiny nails, fast as you can, and meet me down the hall, by your room."

When Mary Louise gets back upstairs, nine shiny nails clutched tightly in one hand, Ruby is kneeling in front of the door of her bedroom, with a paper of pins from the sewing box, and a can of Drano. Mary Louise hands her the nails.

"These is just perfect," Ruby says. She pours a puddle of Drano into its upturned cap, and dips the tip of one of the nails into it, then pokes the nail under the edge of the hall carpet at the left side of Mary Louise's bedroom door, pushing it deep until not even its head shows.

"Why did you dip the nail in Drano?" Mary Louise asks. She didn't know any of the poison things under the kitchen sink could be magic.

"Don't you touch that, hear? It'll burn you bad, cause it's got lye in it. But lye the best thing for cleanin away any evil that's already been here. Ain't got no Red Devil like back home, but you got to use what you got. The nails and the pins, they made of iron, and iron keep any new evil away

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

from your door." Ruby dips a pin in the Drano as she talks and repeats the poking, alternating nails and pins until she pushes the last pin in at the other edge of the door.

"That oughta do it," she says. She pours the few remaining drops of Drano back into the can and screws the lid on tight, then stands up. "Now all we needs to do is set the protectin charm. You know your prayers?" she asks Mary Louise.

"I know 'Now I lay me down to sleep.'"

"Good enough. You get into your room and you kneel down, facin the hall, and say that prayer to the doorway. Say it loud and as best you can. I'm goin to go down and get the sheets out of the dryer. Meet me in Miz Kitty's room when you done."

Mary Louise says her prayers in a loud, clear voice. She doesn't know how this kind of magic spell works, and she isn't sure if she is supposed to say the God Blesses, but she does. She leaves Kitty out and adds Ruby. "And help me to be a good girl, amen," she finishes, and hurries down to her father's room to see what other kinds of magic Ruby knows.

The king-size mattress is bare. Mary Louise lies down on it and rolls over and over three times before falling off the edge onto the carpet. She is just getting up, dusting off the knees of her blue cotton pants, when Ruby appears with an armful of clean sheets, which she dumps onto the bed. Mary Louise lays her face in the middle of the pile. It is still warm and smells like baked cotton. She takes a deep breath.

"You gonna lay there in the laundry all day or help me make this bed?" Ruby asks, laughing.

Mary Louise takes one side of the big flowered sheet and helps Ruby stretch it across the bed and pull the elastic parts over all four corners so it is smooth everywhere.

"Are we going to do a lot more magic?" Mary Louise asks. "I'm getting kind of hungry."

"One more bit, then we can have us some lunch. You want tomato soup?"

"Yes!" says Mary Louise.

"I thought so. Now fetch me a hair from Miz Kitty's hairbrush. See if you can find a nice long one with some dark at the end of it."

Mary Louise goes over to Kitty's dresser and peers at the heavy silver

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

brush. She finds a darker line in the tangle of blond and carefully pulls it out. It is almost a foot long, and the last inch is definitely brown. She carries it over to Ruby, letting it trail through her fingers like the tail of a tiny invisible kite.

"That's good," Ruby says. She reaches into the pocket of her uniform and pulls out a scrap of red felt with three needles stuck into it lengthwise. She pulls the needles out one by one, makes a bundle of them, and wraps it round and round, first with the long strand of Kitty's hair, then with a piece of black thread.

"Hold out your hand," she says.

Mary Louise holds out her hand flat, and Ruby puts the little black-wrapped bundle into it.

"Now, you hold this until you get a picture in your head of Miz Kitty burnin up your pretty picture book. And when it nice and strong, you spit. Okay?"

Mary Louise nods. She scrunches up her eyes, remembering, then spits on the needles.

"You got the knack for this," Ruby says, smiling. "It's a gift."

Mary Louise beams. She does not get many compliments, and stores this one away in the most private part of her thoughts. She will visit it regularly over the next few days until its edges are indistinct and there is nothing left but a warm glow labled RUBY.

"Now put it under this mattress, far as you can reach." Ruby lifts up the edge of the mattress and Mary Louise drops the bundle on the box spring.

"Do you want me to say my prayers again?"

"Not this time, Miss Mouse. Prayers is for protectin. This here is a sufferin hand, bring some of Miz Kitty's meanness back on her own self, and it need another kind of charm. I'll set this one myself." Ruby lowers her voice and begins to chant:

Before the night is over,
Before the day is through.
What you have done to someone else
Will come right back on you.

"There. That ought to do her just fine. Now we gotta make up this bed. Top sheet, blanket, bedspread all smooth and nice, pillows plumped up just so. "

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Does that help the magic?" Mary Louise asks. She wants to do it right, and there are almost as many rules as eating in the dining room. But different.

"Not 'zactly. But it makes it look like it 'bout the most beautiful place to sleep Miz Kitty ever seen, make her want to crawl under them sheets and get her beauty rest. Now help me with that top sheet, okay?"

Mary Louise does, and when they have smoothed the last wrinkle out of the bedspread, Ruby looks at the clock. "Shoot. How'd it get to be after one o'clock? Only fifteen minutes before my story comes on. Let's go down and have ourselves some lunch."

In the kitchen, Ruby heats up a can of Campbell's tomato soup, with milk, not water, the way Mary Louise likes it best, then ladles it out into two yellow bowls. She puts them on a metal tray, adds some saltine crackers and a bottle of ginger ale for her, and a lunchbox bag of Fritos and a glass of milk for Mary Louise, and carries the whole tray into the den. Ruby turns on the TV and they sip and crunch their way through half an hour of *As the World Turns*.

During the commercials, Ruby tells Mary Louise who all the people are, and what they've done, which is mostly bad. When they are done with their soup, another story comes on, but they aren't people Ruby knows, so she turns off the TV and carries the dishes back to the kitchen.

"I gotta do the dustin and finish vacuumin, and ain't no way to talk over that kind of noise," Ruby says, handing Mary Louise a handful of Oreos. "So you go off and play by yourself now, and I'll get my chores done before Miz Kitty comes home."

Mary Louise goes up to her room. At 4:30 she hears Kitty come home, but she only changes into out-to-dinner clothes and leaves and doesn't get into bed. Ruby says good-bye when Mrs. Banks comes at 6:00, and Mary Louise eats dinner in the kitchen and goes upstairs at 8:00, when Mrs. Banks starts to watch *Dr. Kildare*.

On her dresser there is a picture of her mother. She is beautiful, with long curls and a silvery white dress. She looks like a queen, so Mary Louise thinks she might be a princess. She lives in a castle, imprisoned by her evil stepmother, the false queen. But now that there is magic, there will be a happy ending. She crawls under the covers and watches her doorway, wondering what will happen when Kitty tries to come into her room, if there will be flames.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

Kitty begins to scream just before nine Friday morning. Clumps of her hair lie on her pillow like spilled wheat. What is left sprouts from her scalp in irregular clumps, like a crabgrass-infested lawn. Clusters of angry red blisters dot her exposed skin.

By the time Mary Louise runs up from the kitchen, where she is eating a bowl of Kix, Kitty is on the phone. She is talking to her beauty salon. She is shouting, "This is an emergency! An emergency!"

Kitty does not speak to Mary Louise. She leaves the house with a scarf wrapped around her head like a turban, in such a hurry that she does not even bother with lipstick. Mary Louise hears the tires of her T-bird squeal out of the driveway. A shower of gravel hits the side of the house, and then everything is quiet.

Ruby comes upstairs at ten, buttoning the last button on her uniform. Mary Louise is in the breakfast nook, eating a second bowl of Kix. The first one got soggy. She jumps up excitedly when she sees Ruby.

"Miz Kitty already gone?" Ruby asks, her hand on the coffeepot.

"It worked! It worked! Something *bad* happened to her hair. A lot of it fell out, and there are chicken pox where it was. She's at the beauty shop. I think she's going to be there a long time."

Ruby pours herself a cup of coffee. "That so?"

"Uh-huh." Mary Louise grins. "She looks like a *goopher*."

"Well, well, well. That come back on her fast, didn't it? Maybe now she think twice 'bout messin with somebody smaller'n her. But you, Miss Mouse," Ruby wiggles a semi-stern finger at Mary Louise, "Don't you go jumpin up and down shoutin 'bout goophers, hear? Magic ain't nothin to be foolin around with. It can bring sickness, bad luck, a whole heap of misery if it ain't done proper. You hear me?"

Mary Louise nods and runs her thumb and finger across her lips, as if she is locking them. But she is still grinning from ear to ear.

Kitty comes home from the beauty shop late that afternoon. She is in a very, very bad mood, and still has a scarf around her head. Mary Louise is behind the couch in the den, playing seven dwarfs. She is Snow White and is lying very still, waiting for the prince.

Kitty comes into the den and goes to the bar. She puts two ice cubes

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in a heavy squat crystal glass, then reaches up on her tiptoes and feels around on the bookshelf until she finds a small brass key. She unlocks the liquor cabinet and fills her glass with brown liquid. She goes to the phone and makes three phone calls, canceling cocktails, dinner, tennis on Saturday. "Sorry," Kitty says. "Under the weather. Raincheck?" When she is finished she refills her glass, replaces the key, and goes upstairs. Mary Louise does not see her again until Sunday.

Mary Louise stays in her room most of the weekend. It seems like a good idea, now that it is safe there. Saturday afternoon she tiptoes down to the kitchen and makes three peanut butter and honey sandwiches. She is not allowed to use the stove. She takes her sandwiches and some Fritos upstairs and touches one of the nails under the carpet, to make sure it is still there. She knows the magic is working, because Kitty doesn't even try to come in, not once.

At seven-thirty on Sunday night, she ventures downstairs again. Kitty's door is shut. The house is quiet. It is time for Disney. *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color.* It is her favorite program, the only one that is not black and white, except for *Bonanza*, which comes on after her bedtime.

Mary Louise turns on the big TV that is almost as tall as she is, and sits in the middle of the maroon leather couch in the den. Her feet stick out in front of her, and do not quite reach the edge. There is a commercial for Mr. Clean. He has no hair, like Kitty, and Mary Louise giggles, just a little. Then there are red and blue fireworks over the castle where Sleeping Beauty lives. Mary Louise's thumb wanders up to her mouth, and she rests her cheek on the soft nap of her Bankie.

The show is Cinderella, and when the wicked stepmother comes on, Mary Louise thinks of Kitty, but does not giggle. The story unfolds and Mary Louise is bewitched by the colors, by the magic of television. She does not hear the creaking of the stairs. She does not hear the door of the den open, or hear the rattle of ice cubes in an empty crystal glass. She does not see the shadow loom over her until it is too late.

It is a sunny Monday morning. Ruby comes in the basement door and changes into her uniform. She switches on the old brown table radio, waits for its tubes to warm up and begin to glow, then turns the yellowed plastic dial until she finds a station that is more music than static. The Marcels

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

are singing "Blue Moon" as she sorts the laundry, and she dances a little on the concrete floor, swinging and swaying as she tosses white cotton panties into one basket and black nylon socks into another.

She fills the washer with a load of whites, adds a measuring cup of Dreft, and turns the dial to Delicate. The song on the radio changes to "Runaway" as she goes over to the wooden cage built into the wall, where the laundry that has been dumped down the upstairs chute gathers.

"As I walk along...," Ruby sings as she opens the hinged door with its criss-cross of green painted slats. The plywood box inside is a cube about three feet on a side, filled with a mound of flowered sheets and white terry cloth towels. She pulls a handful of towels off the top of the mound and lets them tumble into the pink plastic basket waiting on the floor below. "An' I wonder. I wa-wa-wa-wa-wuh-un-der," she sings, and then stops when the pile moves on its own, and whimpers.

Ruby parts the sea of sheets to reveal a small head of carrot-red hair.

"Miss Mouse? What on God's green earth you doin in there? I like to bury you in all them sheets!"

A bit more of Mary Louise appears, her hair in tangles, her eyes red-rimmed from crying.

"Is Kitty gone?" she asks.

Ruby nods. "She at the beauty parlor again. What you *doin* in there? You hidin from Miz Kitty?"

"Uh-huh." Mary Louise sits up and a cascade of hand towels and washcloths tumbles out onto the floor.

"What she done this time?"

"She — she — " Mary Louise bursts into ragged sobs.

Ruby reaches in and puts her hands under Mary Louise's arms, lifting the weeping child out of the pile of laundry. She carries her over to the basement stairs and sits down, cradling her. The tiny child shakes and holds on tight to Ruby's neck, her tears soaking into the white cotton collar. When her tears subside into trembling, Ruby reaches into a pocket and proffers a pale yellow hankie.

"Blow hard," she says gently. Mary Louise does.

"Now scooch around front a little so you can sit in my lap." Mary Louise scooches without a word. Ruby strokes her curls for a minute. "Sugar? What she do this time?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mary Louise tries to speak, but her voice is still a rusty squeak. After a few seconds she just holds her tightly clenched fist out in front of her and slowly opens it. In her palm is a wrinkled scrap of pale blue flannel, about the size of a playing card, its edges jagged and irregular.

"Miz Kitty do that?"

"Uh-huh," Mary Louise finds her voice. "I was watching Disney and *she* came in to get another drink. She said Bankie was just a dirty old rag with germs and sucking thumbs was for babies — " Mary Louise pauses to take a breath. "She had scissors and she cut up all of Bankie on the floor. She said next time she'd get bigger scissors and cut off my thumbs! She threw my Bankie pieces in the toilet and flushed, three times. This one fell under the couch," Mary Louise says, looking at the small scrap, her voice breaking.

Ruby puts an arm around her shaking shoulders and kisses her forehead. "Hush now. Don't you fret. You just sit down here with me. Everything gonna be okay. You gotta — " A buzzing noise from the washer interrupts her. She looks into the laundry area, then down at Mary Louise and sighs. "You take a couple deep breaths. I gotta move the clothes in the washer so they're not all on one side. When I come back, I'm gonna tell you a story. Make you feel better, okay?"

"Okay," says Mary Louise in a small voice. She looks at her lap, not at Ruby, because nothing is really very okay at all.

Ruby comes back a few minutes later and sits down on the step next to Mary Louise. She pulls two small yellow rectangles out of her pocket and hands one to Mary Louise. "I like to set back and hear a story with a stick of Juicy Fruit in my mouth. Helps my ears open up or somethin. How about you?"

"I like Juicy Fruit," Mary Louise admits.

"I thought so. Save the foil. Fold it up and put it in your pocket."

"So I have someplace to put the gum when the flavor's all used up?"

"Maybe. Or maybe we got somethin else to do and that foil might could come in handy. You save it up neat and we'll see."

Mary Louise puts the gum in her mouth and puts the foil in the pocket of her corduroy pants, then folds her hands in her lap and waits.

"Well, now," says Ruby. "Seems that once, a long, long time ago, down South Carolina, there was a little mouse of a girl with red, red hair and big blue eyes."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Like me?" asks Mary Louise.

"You know, I think she was just about 'zactly like you. Her momma died when she was just a little bit of a girl, and her daddy married hisself a new wife, who was very pretty, but she was mean and lazy. Now, this stepmomma, she didn't much like stayin home to take care of no child weren't really her own and she was awful cruel to that poor little girl. She never gave her enough to eat, and even when it was snowin outside, she just dress her up in thin cotton rags. That child was awful hungry and cold, come winter.

"But her real momma had made her a blanket, a soft blue blanket, and that was the girl's favorite thing in the whole wide world. If she wrapped it around herself and sat real quiet in a corner, she was warm enough, then.

"Now, her stepmomma, she didn't like seein that little girl happy. That little girl had power inside her, and it scared her stepmomma. Scared her so bad that one day she took that child's most favorite special blanket and cut it up into tiny pieces, so it wouldn't be no good for warmin her up at all."

"That was really mean of her," Mary Louise says quietly.

"Yes it was. Awful mean. But you know what that little girl did next? She went into the kitchen, and sat down right next to the cookstove, where it was a little bit warm. She sat there, holdin one of the little scraps from her blanket, and she cried, cause she missed havin her real momma. And when her tears hit the stove, they turned into steam, and she stayed warm as toast the rest of that day. Ain't nothin warmer than steam heat, no siree.

"But when her stepmomma saw her all smilin and warm again, what did that woman do but lock up the woodpile, out of pure spite. See, she ate out in fancy rest'rants all the time, and she never did cook, so it didn't matter to her if there was fire in the stove or not.

"So finally that child dragged her cold self down to the basement. It was mighty chilly down there, but she knew it was someplace her stepmomma wouldn't look for her, cause the basement's where work gets done, and her stepmomma never did do one lick of work.

"That child hid herself back of the old wringer washer, in a dark, dark corner. She was cold, and that little piece of blanket was only big enough to wrap a mouse in. She wished she was warm. She wished and wished and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

between her own power and that magic blanket, she found her mouse self. Turned right into a little gray mouse, she did. Then she wrapped that piece of soft blue blanket around her and hid herself away just as warm as if she was in a feather bed.

"But soon she heard somebody comin down the wood stairs into the basement, clomp, clomp, clomp. And she thought it was her mean old stepmomma comin to make her life a misery again, so she scampered quick like mice do, back into a little crack in the wall. 'Cept it weren't her stepmomma. It was the cleanin lady, comin down the stairs with a big basket of mendin."

"Is that you?" Mary Louise asks.

"I reckon it was someone pretty much like me," Ruby says, smiling. "And she saw that little mouse over in the corner with that scrap of blue blanket tight around her, and she said, "Scuse me Miss Mouse, but I needs to patch me up this old raggy sweater, and that little piece of blanket is just the right size. Can I have it?'"

"Why would she talk to a mouse?" Mary Louise asks, puzzled.

"Well, now, the lady knew that it wasn't no regular mouse, 'cause she weren't no ordinary cleanin lady, she was a conjure woman too. She could see that magic girl spirit inside the mouse shape clear as day."

"Oh. Okay."

Ruby smiles. "Now, the little mouse-child had to think for a minute, because that piece of blue blanket was 'bout the only thing she loved left in the world. But the lady asked so nice, she gave over her last little scrap of blanket for the mendin and turned back into a little girl.

"Well sir, the spirit inside that blue blanket was powerful strong, even though the pieces got all cut up. So when the lady sewed that blue scrap onto that raggy old sweater, what do you know? It turned into a big warm magic coat, just the size of that little girl. And when she put on that magic coat, it kept her warm and safe, and her stepmomma never could hurt her no more."

"I wish there really was magic," says Mary Louise sadly. "Because she *did* hurt me again."

Ruby sighs. "Magic's there, sugar. It truly is. It just don't always work the way you think it will. That sufferin hand we put in Miz Kitty's bed, it work just fine. It scared her plenty. Trouble is, when she scared, she get

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mad, and then she get mean, and there ain't no end to it. No tellin what she might take it into her head to cut up next."

"My thumbs," says Mary Louise solemnly. She looks at them as if she is saying good-bye.

"That's what I'm afraid of. Somethin terrible bad. I been thinkin on this over the weekend, and yesterday night I call my Aunt Nancy down in Beaufort, where I'm from. She's the most powerful conjure woman I know, taught me when I was little. I ask her what she'd do, and she says, 'sounds like you all need a Peaceful Home hand, stop all the angry, make things right.'"

"Do we have to make the bed again?" asks Mary Louise.

"No, sugar. This is a wearin hand, like my money hand. 'Cept it's for you to wear. Got lots of special things in it."

"Like what?"

"Well, first we got to weave together a hair charm. A piece of yours, a piece of Miz Kitty's. Hers before the goopher, I think. And we need some dust from the house. And some rosemary from the kitchen. I can get all them when I clean today. The rest is stuff I bet you already got."

"I have magic things?"

"I b'lieve so. That piece of tinfoil from your Juicy Fruit? We need that. And somethin lucky. You got somethin real lucky?"

"I have a penny what got run over by a train," Mary Louise offers.

"Just so. Now the last thing. You know how my little bag's green flannel, 'cause it's a money hand?"

Mary Louise nods.

"Well, for a Peaceful Home hand, we need a square of light blue flannel. You know where I can find one of those?"

Mary Louise's eyes grow wide behind her glasses. "But it's the only piece I've got left."

"I know," Ruby says softly.

"It's like in the story, isn't it?"

"Just like."

"And like in the story, if I give it to you, Kitty can't hurt me ever again?"

"Just like."

Mary Louise opens her fist again and looks at the scrap of blue flannel for a long time. "Okay," she says finally, and gives it to Ruby.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It'll be all right, Miss Mouse. I b'lieve everything will turn out just fine. Now I gotta finish this laundry and do me some housework. I'll meet you in the kitchen round one-thirty. We'll eat and I'll fix up your hand right after my story."

At two o'clock the last credits of *As the World Turns* disappear from the TV. Ruby and Mary Louise go down to the basement. They lay out all the ingredients on the padded gray surface of the ironing board. Ruby assembles the hand, muttering under her breath from time to time. Mary Louise can't hear the words. Ruby wraps everything in the blue flannel and snares the neck of the walnut-sized bundle with three twists of white string.

"Now all we gotta do is give it a little drink, then you can put it on," she tells Mary Louise.

"Drink of what?"

Ruby frowns. "I been thinkin on that. My Aunt Nancy said best thing is to get me some Peaceful oil. But I don't know no root doctors up here. Ain't been round Detroit long enough."

"We could look in the phone book."

"Ain't the kind of doctor you finds in the Yellow Pages. Got to know someone who knows someone. And I don't. I told Aunt Nancy that, and she says in that case, reg'lar whiskey'll do just fine. That's what I been givin my money hand. Little bit of my husband's whiskey every mornin for six days now. I don't drink, myself, 'cept maybe a cold beer on a hot summer night. But whiskey's strong magic, comes to conjurin. Problem is, I can't take your hand home with me to give it a drink, 'long with mine."

"Why not?"

"'Cause once it goes round your neck, nobody else can touch it, not even me, else the conjure magic leak right out." Ruby looks at Mary Louise thoughtfully. "What's the most powerful drink you ever had, Miss Mouse?"

Mary Louise hesitates for a second, then says, "Vernor's ginger ale. The bubbles are *very* strong. They go up my nose and make me sneeze."

Ruby laughs. "I think that just might do. Ain't as powerful as whiskey, but it fits, you bein just a child and all. And there's one last bottle up in the Frigidaire. You go on up now and fetch it."

Mary Louise brings down the yellow and green bottle. Ruby holds her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thumb over the opening and sprinkles a little bit on the flannel bag, mumbling some more words that end with "father son and holy ghost amen." Then she ties the white yarn around Mary Louise's neck so that the bag lies under her left armpit, and the string doesn't show.

"This bag's gotta be a secret," she says. "Don't talk about it, and don't let nobody else see it. Can you do that?"

Mary Louise nods. "I dress myself in the morning, and I change into my jammies in the bathroom."

"That's good. Now the next three mornings, before you get dressed, you give your bag a little drink of this Vernor's, and say, 'Lord, bring an end to the evil in this house, amen.' Can you remember that?"

Mary Louise says she can. She hides the bottle of Vernor's behind the leg of her bed. Tuesday morning she sprinkles the bag with Vernor's before putting on her T-shirt. The bag is a little sticky.

But Mary Louise thinks the magic might be working. Kitty has bought a blond wig, a golden honey color. Mary Louise thinks it looks like a helmet, but doesn't say so. Kitty smiles in the mirror at herself and is in a better mood. She leaves Mary Louise alone.

Wednesday morning the bag is even stickier. It pulls at Mary Louise's armpit when she reaches for the box of Kix in the cupboard. Ruby says this is okay.

By Thursday, the Vernor's has been open for too long. It has gone flat and there are no bubbles at all. Mary Louise sprinkles her bag, but worries that it will lose its power. She is afraid the charm will not work, and that Kitty will come and get her. Her thumbs ache in anticipation.

When she goes downstairs Kitty is in her new wig and a green dress. She is going out to a luncheon. She tells Mary Louise that Ruby will not be there until noon, but she will stay to cook dinner. Mary Louise will eat in the dining room tonight, and until then she should be good and not to make a mess. After she is gone, Mary Louise eats some Kix and worries about her thumbs.

When her bowl is empty, she goes into the den, and stands on the desk chair so she can reach the tall books on the bookshelf. They are still over her head, and she cannot see, but her fingers reach. The dust on the tops makes her sneeze; she finds the key on a large black book called *Who's Who in Manufacturing 1960.* The key is brass and old-looking.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mary Louise unlocks the liquor cabinet and looks at the bottles. Some are brown, some are green. One of the green ones has Toto dogs on it, a black one and a white one, and says SCOTCH WHISKEY. The bottle is half-full and heavy. She spills some on the floor, and her little bag is soaked more than sprinkled, but she thinks this will probably make up for the flat ginger ale.

She puts the green bottle back and carefully turns it so the Toto dogs face out, the way she found it. She climbs back up on the chair and puts the key back up on top of *Manufacturing*, then climbs down.

The little ball is cold and damp under her arm, and smells like medicine. She changes her shirt and feels safer. But she does not want to eat dinner alone with Kitty. That is not safe at all. She thinks for a minute, then smiles. Ruby has shown her how to make a *room* safe.

There are only five nails left in the jar in the garage. But she doesn't want to keep Kitty *out* of the dining room, just make it safe to eat dinner there. Five is probably fine. She takes the nails into the kitchen and opens the cupboard under the sink. She looks at the Drano. She is not allowed to touch it, not by Kitty's rules, not by babysitter rules, not by Ruby's rules. She looks at the pirate flag man on the side of the can. The poison man. He is bad, bad, bad, and she is scared. But she is more scared of Kitty.

She carries the can over to the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room and kneels down. When she looks close she sees dirt and salt and seeds and bits of things in the thin space between the linoleum and the carpet.

The can is very heavy, and she doesn't think she can pour any Drano into the cap. Not without spilling it. So she tips the can upside down three times, then opens it. There is milky Drano on the inside of the cap. She carefully dips in each nail and pushes them, one by one, under the edge of the dining room carpet. It is hard to push them all the way in, and the two in the middle go crooked and cross over each other a little.

"This is a protectin' hand," she says out loud to the nails. Now she needs a prayer, but not a bedtime prayer. A dining room prayer. She thinks hard for a minute, then says, "For what we are about to receive may we be truly thankful amen." Then she puts the Drano back under the sink and washes her hands three times with soap, just to make sure.

Ruby gets there at noon. She gives Mary Louise a quick hug and a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

smile, and then tells her to scoot until dinnertime, because she has to vacuum and do the kitchen floor and polish the silver. Mary Louise wants to ask Ruby about magic things, but she scoots.

Ruby is mashing potatoes in the kitchen when Kitty comes home. Mary Louise sits in the corner of the breakfast nook, looking at the comics in the paper, still waiting for Ruby to be less busy and come and talk to her. Kitty puts her purse down and goes into the den. Mary Louise hears the rattle of ice cubes. A minute later, Kitty comes into the kitchen. Her glass has an inch of brown liquid in it. Her eyes have an angry look.

"Mary Louise, go to your room. I need to speak to Ruby in private."

Mary Louise gets up without a word and goes into the hall. But she does not go upstairs. She opens the basement door silently and pulls it almost shut behind her. She stands on the top step and listens.

"Ruby, I'm afraid I'm going to have to let you go," says Kitty. Mary Louise feels her armpits grow icy cold and her eyes begin to sting.

"Ma'am?"

"You've been drinking."

"No, ma'am. I ain't — "

"Don't try to deny it. I know you coloreds have a weakness for it. That's why Mr. Whittaker and I keep the cabinet in the den locked. For your own good. But when I went in there, just now, I found the cabinet door open. I cannot have servants in my house that I do not trust. Is that clear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Mary Louise waits for Ruby to say something else, but there is silence.

"I will pay you through the end of the week, but I think it's best if you leave after dinner tonight." There is a rustling and the snap of Kitty's handbag opening. "There," she says. "I think I've been more than generous, but of course I cannot give you references."

"No, ma'am," says Ruby.

"Very well. Dinner at six. Set two places. Mary Louise will eat with me." Mary Louise hears the sound of Kitty's heels marching off, then the creak of the stairs going up. There is a moment of silence, and the basement door opens.

Ruby looks at Mary Louise and takes her hand. At the bottom of the stairs she sits, and gently pulls Mary Louise down beside her.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Miss Mouse? You got somethin you want to tell me?"

Mary Louise hangs her head.

"You been in your Daddy's liquor?"

A tiny nod. "I didn't *drink* any. I just gave my bag a little. The Vernor's was flat and I was afraid the magic wouldn't work. I put the key back. I guess I forgot to lock the door."

"I guess you did."

"I'll tell Kitty it was me," Mary Louise says, her voice on the edge of panic. "You don't have to be fired. I'll tell her."

"Tell her what, Miss Mouse? Tell her you was puttin your daddy's whiskey on a conjure hand?" Ruby shakes her head. "Sugar, you listen to me. Miz Kitty thinks I been drinkin, she just fire me. But she find out I been teachin you black juju magic, she gonna call the po-lice. Better you keep quiet, hear?"

"But it's not fair!"

"Maybe it is, maybe it ain't." Ruby strokes Mary Louise's hair and smiles a sad smile, her eyes as gentle as her hands. "But, see, after she talk to me that way, ain't no way I'm gonna keep workin for Miz Kitty nohow. It be okay, though. My money hand gonna come through. I can feel it. Already startin to, maybe. The Ford plant's hirin again, and my husband's down there today, signin up. Maybe when I gets home, he's gonna tell me good news. May just be."

"You can't *leave* me!" Mary Louise cries.

"I got to. I got my own life."

"Take me with you."

"I can't, sugar." Ruby puts her arms around Mary Louise. "Poor Miss Mouse. You livin in this big old house with nice things all 'round you, 'cept nobody nice to you. But angels watchin out for you. I b'lieve that. Keep you safe till you big enough to make your own way, find your real kin."

"What's kin?"

"Fam'ly. Folks you belong to."

"Are you my kin?"

"Not by blood, sugar. Not hardly. But we're heart kin, maybe. 'Cause I love you in my heart, and I ain't never gonna forget you. That's a promise." Ruby kisses Mary Louise on the forehead and pulls her into a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

long hug. "Now since Miz Kitty already give me my pay, I 'spect I oughta go up, give her her dinner. I reckon you don't want to eat with her?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. I'll tell her you ain't feelin well, went on up to bed. But I'll come downstairs, say good-bye, 'fore I leave." Ruby stands up and looks fondly down at Mary Louise. "It'll be okay, Miss Mouse. There's miracles every day. Why, last Friday, they put a fella up in space. Imagine that? A man up in space? So ain't nothin impossible, not if you wish just hard as you can. Not if you believe." She rests her hand on Mary Louise's head for a moment, then walks slowly up the stairs and back into the kitchen.

MARY LOUISE SITS on the steps and feels like the world is crumbling around her. This is not how the story is supposed to end. This is not happily ever after. She cups her tiny hand around the damp, sticky bag under her arm and closes her eyes and thinks about everything that Ruby has told her. She wishes for the magic to be real.

And it is. There are no sparkles, no gold. This is basement magic, deep and cool. Power that has seeped and puddled, gathered slowly, beneath the notice of queens, like the dreams of small awkward girls. Mary Louise believes with all her heart, and finds the way to her mouse self.

Mouse sits on the bottom step for a minute, a tiny creature with a round pink tail and fur the color of new rust. She blinks her blue eyes, then scampers off the step and across the basement floor. She is quick and clever, scurrying along the baseboards, seeking familiar smells, a small ball of blue flannel trailing behind her.

When she comes to the burnt-orange coat hanging inches from the floor, she leaps. Her tiny claws find purchase in the nubby fabric, and she climbs up to the pocket, wriggles over and in. Mouse burrows into a pale cotton hankie that smells of girl tears and wraps herself tight around the flannel ball that holds her future. She puts her pink nose down on her small pink paws and waits for her true love to come.

Kitty sits alone at the wide mahogany table. The ice in her drink has melted. The kitchen is only a few feet away, but she does not get up. She

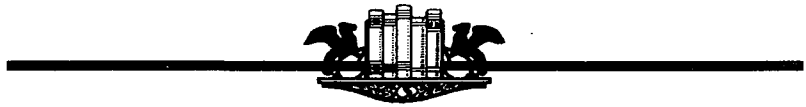
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

presses the buzzer beneath her feet, to summon Ruby. The buzzer sounds in the kitchen. Kitty waits. Nothing happens. Impatient, she presses on the buzzer with all her weight. It shifts, just a fraction of an inch, and its wire presses against the two lye-tipped nails that have crossed it. The buzzer shorts out with a hiss. The current, diverted from its path to the kitchen, returns to Kitty. She begins to twitch, as if she were covered in stinging ants, and her eyes roll back in her head. In a gesture that is both urgent and awkward, she clutches at the tablecloth, pulling it and the dishes down around her. Kitty Whittaker, a former Miss Bloomfield Hills, falls to her knees and begins to howl wordlessly at the Moon.

Downstairs, Ruby hears the buzzer, then a crash of dishes. She starts to go upstairs, then shrugs. She takes off her white uniform for the last time. She puts on her green skirt and her cotton blouse, leaves the white Keds under the sink, puts on her flat black shoes. She looks in the clothes chute, behind the furnace, calls Mary Louise's name, but there is no answer. She calls again, then, with a sigh, puts on her nubby orange outdoor coat and pulls the light string. The basement is dark behind her as she opens the door and walks out into the soft spring evening.

"There — I heard it again!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Guardian, by Joe Haldeman, Ace, 2002, $22.95.

I LOVE IT when an author plays with our expectations. For instance, consider the book in hand. I know that Haldeman is a skilled stylist. That he writes thoughtful books, rich with characterization. But who knew he could so completely get into the head of a woman born in 1858? That this master of science fiction, who has made the interior of spaceships and the far reaches of space so believable, could also so readily bring to life the world of the Midwest and Alaska in the latter part of the nineteenth century?

Trust me, he does.

The book is presented as having been taken from the journals of Rosa Coleman, born before the Civil War. A bad marriage sends her fleeing with her teenage son to the wild west, and much of the book details their flight and eventual journey to the gold fields of Alaska. Haldeman conveys the voice of the character perfectly, so much so that you never really think about who's actually writing the book: a male professor at MIT and Vietnam vet. He also does a wonderful job describing this lost time, from train travel and railroad strikes to steamboats and life in the rough mining towns that provided the launching bases for prospectors on their way to the gold fields.

What has any of this to do with fantasy or sf? Plenty, you'll discover if you read the book, but I don't want to spoil it for you. Let me just say that Rosa has an experience that takes her to unexpected places, one that changes not only her, but the entire world.

Highly recommended.

Echo & Narcissus, by Mark Siegel, Aardwolf Press, 2003, $14.95.

Echo & Narcissus is like a traffic accident: grotesque and grim and bloody, but so compelling that it's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

impossible to look away. It concerns a pair of runaways, Echo and Max, but this is no YA book.

It starts in New Orleans, where the two become involved with a witch couple named Juno and Z who run their part of the city in a chaos of blood and sex, drugs and violence. In an attempt to take charge of those parts of the city not already under their control, Juno and Z bring catastrophe down on themselves, leaving Echo and Max to flee for their lives.

Echo is a singer, but she carries a curse that renders her unable to speak — only to echo what someone else says. She's desperately in love with Max. Max is a guitarist and songwriter. Unable to love or care about anything, he's constantly pushing himself to the very edge of sanity and life.

They end up squatting in the projects in L.A., in a place ironically called Echo Park, home to gangs and drug dealers. It's also home to a mysterious blind man and to a cult pushing a special Ecstasy-like drug that delivers either the best high you can imagine, or literally dissolves you, leaving only a black stain on the ground where you fell.

When the pair are spotted playing at some bar by a music agent, the fame that follows their rise to the top of the music business allows them to disengage themselves physically from the place. But Echo Park retains a hold on their souls and no matter how far away they get, how much good they do (Echo), or how much they waste their lives (Max), in the end they have to return to face the demons waiting for them in the park.

There's far more to the story, of course. The supporting cast is wonderfully realized — from Z's henchmen and various band members, to a pair of cops trying to solve the mysterious deaths in Echo Park — and the plot never goes quite where you expect it to, but always where it has to go. And while, yes, the novel is gruesome and extremely violent in many of its scenes, there's also a tremendous amount of heart to be found here.

While rock 'n' roll novels aren't new, they are difficult to pull off, and Mark Siegel has done a credible job of making the concert and bar scenes an integral part of the story. His prose throughout is very edgy and now, and the hybrid musical styles he puts forward as the reason for Echo and Max's rapid rise to fame are certainly plausible. Whether it will all seem that way in ten years, only time will tell. But for right now, *Echo & Narcissus* is a fascinating

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

read, full of flash and thunder, ranging from the hot light of the concert stage to the dark underbellies of New Orleans, L.A., and Las Vegas.

This Cape Is Red Because I've Been Bleeding, by Tom Piccirilli, Catalyst Press, 2002, $14.

Prose poetry is a strange hybrid. It follows the sentence structure of prose, but the sentences are broken up — arbitrarily, it can seem — and placed on separate lines. Paragraphs become stanzas. And of course the narrative, if existent, also follows a different course from prose because events are compressed, while thoughts and images can swell into long descriptive passages.

But there's a point to it all — at least in the hands of a good poet. The way the sentences are broken up, the choice of focus on specific event and image, have all been carefully considered to deliver the most impact, whether that be drama, irony, shock, or even a bittersweet nostalgia. In the hands of that aforementioned good poet, a prose poem can pack all the punch of a novel. Or at least a short story.

Tucked away behind a very effective cover by Jeremy Caniglia, the verses in this slim collection show that Tom Piccirilli understands the potential of a prose poem. From the opening meditation on the distances that lie inside the family unit ("Jones Beach, Thirty Years After the Last Sand Castle") to the near-death experience chronicled in the final poem, "The Last One," the verses here all play on the strength of the medium. The stories they tell cover the full range of the human condition, in prose that's matter-of-fact, but then suddenly soars to lyric heights. They're inhabited by ghosts, both literal and imagined, and like the best poetry does, they make us see the commonplace in a new light. And while Piccirilli is certainly capable of handling difficult issues, he does it in a manner that's still very accessible.

So if the idea of reading a poetry collection feels a bit intimidating to you, but you think you might like to give it a try, *This Cape Is Red* would be an excellent place to start.

The Last Oblivion, by Clark Ashton Smith, Hippocampus Press, 2002, $15.

The Black Diamonds, by Clark Ashton Smith, Hippocampus Press, 2002, $15.

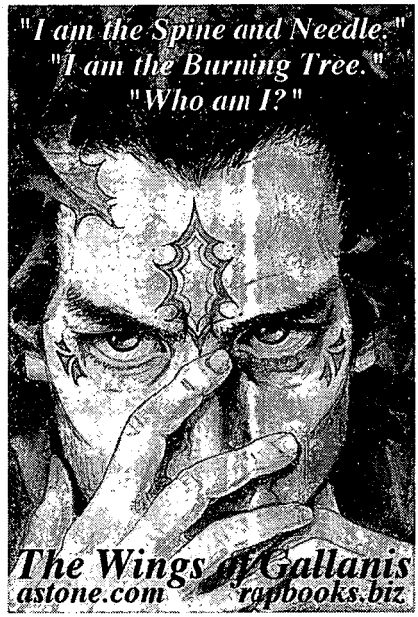
If, however, you're already an aficionado of verse, or would like to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

give something more complex a try, I would highly recommend *The Last Oblivion*, a new collection bringing together the best of Clark Ashton Smith's fantastic poetry. The verses you'll find here aren't easy reading, either in subject matter or in their dense, gorgeous language, but effort spent will be well-rewarded.

For, while better remembered (if at all, these days) for his short story cycles set in Zothique and Hyperborea, Smith was also a master of the poetic form. His strict meters and complex use of language are a joy to read, especially in a time when everything — in contemporary writing as well as the world at large — is feted for its brevity and its accessibility to the lowest common denominator. Smith's poetry isn't for the fast food reader, and neither is his prose.

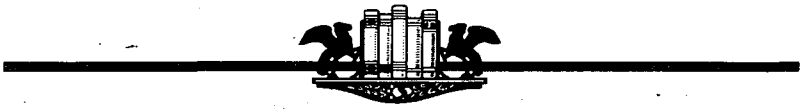
This collection was put together by S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz, the former also editing another recent Hippocampus Press book by Smith. *The Black Diamonds* was written when Smith was fourteen, and while the novel doesn't really stand up to the masterful short stories Smith came to write in the years to follow, it's still a fascinating glimpse into the early workings of his fertile imagination.



I'll recommend the novel to the Smith fan; the poetry collection to anyone who loves verse with a dark, fantastic slant.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



BOOKS

JAMES SALLIS

Report to the Men's Club, by Carol Emshwiller, Small Beer Press, 2002, $16.

The Mount, by Carol Emshwiller, Small Beer Press, 2002, $16.

If Lions Could Speak, by Paul Park, Cosmos Books/Wildside Press, 2002, $15.

I FIRST MET Carol Emshwiller around 1966. Like Judy Merril in her columns for this magazine and like Mike Moorcock's *New Worlds*, Damon Knight and Kate Wilhelm had become a kind of epicenter of the seismic shocks coursing through science fiction. Damon and Kate hosted a yearly conference at their home in Milford, Pennsylvania, which (depending on your age, I suppose) looked like something out of Charles Addams or one of John Irving's magical hotels. It was a house of many levels and surprises. When later I took up residence there, Damon and Kate having relocated to Florida, I'd remark only half in jest that visitors wandering up the steps from the living room often were not seen again for weeks.

Carol had been publishing stories in *F&SF* since 1957. At least seven appeared between then and the time I met her. We were more or less of an age, but I felt she'd been a part of my life much longer. Not only had I read her stories, I'd seen her face on the cover: husband Ed often used her as model. A couple of years later, Ed took the photograph that appeared on my first collection of stories, *A Few Last Words*.

Some writers are in the pocket from the first. They may be writing romances or Ace doubles for $500, they may be publishing in literary magazines with a circulation in double digits or in magazines considered low-end even for genre fiction, but when you find their work, when you read it, you just know. Tom Disch, Chip Delany, Joanna Russ, David R. Bunch, Phil Farmer,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ted Sturgeon, Alfred Bester, Walter Tevis. Carol Emshwiller.

Though she's one of the finest and most original writers in the United States, outside the genre Carol remains spottily known. That second adjective, *original*, may be the tip-off — the *tell*, as gamblers say. Her work is undefinable. She's a feminist writer who adores men, a literary artist who often prefers to work in or springboard off fantastic literature, an experimentalist anchored firmly to plot and character interaction. So, while near-universal acclaim showers down on the like of T. C. Boyle, Toni Morrison, or newcomer Zadie Smith, Carol's forever slipping past the border guards, under the radar, into new territory.

Select readers who hadn't encountered Carol's work in magazines were jolted awake with her collection, *Verging on the Pertinent*, in 1989 from Coffee House Press. (Harper & Row's modest 1972 collection, *Joy in Our Cause*, went largely unnoticed.) Another collection, *The Start of the End of It All*, and a novel, *Carmen Dog*, appeared in 1990 from Mercury House. Lines outside the tent began to grow. 1995 brought, again from Mercury House, *Ledoyt*, Carol's reinvention of the Western. A sequel, *Leaping Man Hill*, followed in 1999.

It's difficult to define just what it is that Carol does, to divine how she achieves this admixture of the comic and tragic, how she finds her way to such extraordinary voices. Part of it's a certain intimacy, this constant sense that she's whispering in your ear. Part of the larger secret is that, while the general role of literature is to reinvest the ordinary, the daily — to recover the wonder at its heart — most Emshwiller stories move in quite the opposite direction, taking up the extraordinary — a foundling child who happens to be an alien, a love affair with Bigfoot, women who turn into dogs, dogs who turn into women — and making it seem not at all unusual. The reader doesn't merely suspend disbelief. He or she merrily, with the scoop of the first sentences, chucks it over the side of the boat.

Report to the Men's Club contains nineteen Emshwiller stories published between 1977 and 2002, most of them toward the late end. The first, "Grandma" (which originally saw print in the magazine you're holding), limns the final days of a superhero from the point of view of her granddaughter.

"She tried to fly as she used to. She did fly. For my sake. She skimmed along just barely above

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the sage and bitterbrush, her feet snagging at the taller ones. That was all the lift she could get."

The last story, "After All," follows a confused elderly woman in her flight from home. Just as she starts back, there are bright, bright lights, no cameras, and far too much action.

"Who would have thought it, the end of the world as if just for me. Right on time, too, before my slippers give out entirely."

"Mrs. Jones" tells the story of spinster sisters, one of whom finds a creature in the orchard, rescues and rehabilitates it even to the extent of hacking off its wings, and finally takes it on a honeymoon. "Water Master" and "Desert Child" are, like many of Emshwiller's stories, novels in miniature, creating entire, teeming worlds while offering up but a single slice — never figuratively, from the outside, but always intimately, from within. As readers we're instantly inside the story looking out.

So it is with her latest novel, *The Mount*. Here's the whole of an alien world presented in all its complexity, piece by ill-fitting piece, impression by confused impression.

A century and a half ago, mankind was overrun by aliens, odd fellows with huge heads, incredibly strong hands and Thalidomide-like flippers for legs. Mankind has become, not dogs as in Tom Disch's *Mankind Under the Leash*, but mounts: beasts of burden destined to take the Hoots from place to place. In return, the Hoots (as they keep insisting) give mounts better lives than they could ever have imagined. Nice stalls, warm food, light blankets, loving ownership. Only occasionally a touch of the pole. Portraits of great mounts grace the Hoots' residences. Humans are known by pedigree: Charley out of Merry Mary and Beauty.

"I have a good conformation. They said so when they came to take a look at me and watch me on the go-round. They said I have a nice trot. That didn't just happen....

"I'm a Seattle. We're the best for size and strength, though we're not as fast as the Tennessees. I want to be a good Seattle. I want to be the best there is."

There is, of course — this is a novel, after all, and a science fiction novel of rather pure strain — a revolution of sorts. Humans break away from the masters, killing them, leveling towns, fleeing into the mountains to establish their own tribal society. In traditional science fiction such triumphant return to the status quo might well be the point,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the narrative become little more than an extended allegory of racism. But in Emshwiller's world nothing is that uncomplicated. Charley Horse and Little Master flee, but they flee together, bound in ways they are just coming to understand, and coming of age together.

Theodore Sturgeon wore a medallion on his neck signifying "Ask the next question." Carol Emshwiller's work *begins* with the next question.

Paul Park is known inside the field for his trilogy the Starbridge Chronicles *(Soldiers of Paradise, Sugar Rain, The Cult of Loving Kindness)*, for the novel *Coelestis*, and for a handful of stories published in top venues such as *Interzone*, *Omni*, and the magazine at hand. Beyond the field he's known chiefly for *The Gospel of Corax*, a brilliant historical novel exploring the Jesus myth. Elsewhere I've written of *Coelestis* as one of science fiction's great achievements, and as perhaps *the* consummate novel dealing with colonialism.

What I said then of the controlled, closely written *Coelestis* could as easily be said of the saga of the Starbridge Chronicles, which is at once religious allegory and an exercise in cyclic, Viconian history, rich in textures in a manner rare to science fiction. "Park's achievement," I noted, "is to write a novel at once believably the story of another world, and at the same time one whose archetypes and symbology resonate at every interface with our own. In a way, in the sense of André Gide's statement that he wrote to be *re*read, *Coelestis* is not one novel — albeit a throughtful, brilliantly conceived and realized, profoundly symbolic and, at its heart, classic novel — but a series of novels."

Much the same might also be said of the thirteen stories collected by Cosmos Books/Wildside Press in *If Lions Could Speak*. Dedicated to the author's children, this collection brings together roughly a decade of stories, 1992 to 2002, along with one heretofore unpublished and a final piece carved from *Soldiers of Paradise* (1987).

Here again, as with Emshwiller, is an intimate voice. But whereas Emshwiller's seems more the voice of a diary or of confidences among friends, Park's is that of the person who sidles up to you at the bar with something he just *has* to tell you.

"Here's how I found out," he says. ("Get a Grip")

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I had been to Los Angeles before and hated it." ("A Man on Crutches")

Or the opening of "The Last Homosexual": "At my tenth high school reunion at the Fairmont Hotel, I ran into Steve Daigrepont and my life changed. That was three years ago. Now I am living by myself in a motel room, in the southeast corner of the Republic of California. But in those days I was Jimmy Brothers, and my wife and I owned a house uptown off Audubon Park, in New Orleans."

Time is not an arrow. The past is forever collapsing into the present — as is the future. Park's opening story, recalling both Woody Guthrie's "Do-Re-Mi" and Ben Hecht's assertion that tomorrow is a hammer aimed at the skull of man, begins: "Everybody wants to see the future, but of course they can't. They get turned back at the border. 'Go away,' the customs people tell them. 'You can't come in. Go home.' Often you'll get people on TV who say they snuck across. Some claim it's wonderful and some claim it's a nightmare, so in that way it's like before there was time travel at all."

Often with Park you have the sense that simultaneously he is walking across eggshells without breaking them and kicking footholds in a cliffside as he climbs. Apocalypses, the ones that matter, are private.

Of his fascination with religion, Park says: "What I find interesting ...is that in no other enterprise (except, perhaps, democratic politics) does the heartbreakingly pure idealism of human beings exist in such close proximity to their foulest and most corrupt instincts....There's something Jeshua says in *Corax*, which I believe: 'There is no word that men put in the mouth of God, that is not a dangerous lie.'"

Or in the mouth of politicians, teachers, mentors, parents.

For Paul Park's final message is that we are what we think we are, what we strive and yearn to be, as much as what our actions make us — and that both have the capacity to destroy or redeem us. Like our social orders, like the religious and mythic templates alongside which we lay our lives, we are self-begetting, forever reworking on the frame of destiny a patchwork of freedom.

Books Now
To order these books, (24hrs, 365 days) please call (800)266-5766 (Ext. 9500) or visit us at www.clicksmart.com/fsf

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

One of the nice things about a fifty-year-old magazine is that you never know when an old friend will drop by. The last time we published one of Mr. Friedman's stories was back in 1967, at which time the author had two novels to his credit: Stern *and* A Mother's Kisses. *In the thirty-odd years since, Mr. Friedman has published about half a dozen novels, several collections of short stories, one volume of essays, four plays, and he also wrote screenplays for several films, including* Stir Crazy *and a fantasy called* Splash. *(That one earned an Oscar nomination and a National Society of Film Critics award.) He also has a few acting credits—you can see him on screen in* You've Got Mail *and Woody Allen's film* Celebrity, *among others.*

His latest fantasy is a short metaphysical tale that may make you wonder if "the squared circle" actually describes the typical New York apartment.

Protect Yourself at All Times

By Bruce Jay Friedman

THERE WAS NO EVIDENCE that it was a grudge match. To the contrary, the fighters touched gloves respectfully at the end of each brutal round. Yet few in the arena could recall seeing two men in a boxing ring attack each other with such savagery. One was a pale square-shouldered Irish middleweight with a conventional straight-ahead style, the other a Jamaican who was listed at the same weight but was much scrawnier than his opponent. He had, nonetheless, what the boxing analysts call a "wide repertoire" of skills. Both men had decent but not especially distinguished records in the ring. There was nothing in their previous matches to indicate they were capable of fighting at such a high level and with such unrelieved intensity. Yet something in each man seemed to tap into a well of fury in the other. They did not bother to feel each other out. At the opening bell, they flew at one another and began to trade punches to the head and body — a furious exchange that had the crowd in a state of frenzy. Before the third round had ended, the excited television announcers were already calling it The Fight of the Year.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Philip Collins, a retired high school teacher, watched the action on a television set in a small apartment above a Greek restaurant in the Chelsea district of Manhattan. He was a tall, slender man who was, at seventy-three, a bit stooped over. Though his hair had turned white, he had lost little of it. And he still had the strong profile that had led more than one person to ask if he was a film actor.

Collins had intended to thaw out his frozen dinner in the microwave, but the televised fight was so riveting that he did not want to get up from his recliner and miss a moment of it. He began to imagine that he could actually feel the force of the blows being exchanged in the ring. At that point, he lost some appetite and lit a pipe. And he allowed his mind to wander.

Collins had followed the sport for many decades. When he was a boy of five, his father, who had a milk delivery route in the East Bronx, had taken him to see his first fight — one that was held in an outdoor arena. Collins became a fan of a local heavyweight named Tami Mauriello who fought in the main event that night. Later in his career, the fighter gained recognition with a knockdown of the great Joe Louis in the first round of their championship fight. The astonished Louis had recovered and finished off Mauriello before the round ended. Whenever Collins discussed the fight, he was quick to point out that one of Mauriello's legs was shorter than the other, so that he could only move in a forward direction. The predictable style unfortunately made him easy prey for a skilled opponent.

Collins himself had never done any boxing. Only once had he been tempted to enter the ring. He had signed up to participate in an amateur fight sponsored by The Police Athletic League. But the night before the fight, he was so sick with worry about what might happen to him that he was unable to sleep. In the morning he threw up. His mother had to call ahead on his behalf and cancel.

The memory of what he thought of as an act of cowardice stayed with him for years. Nonetheless, he continued to follow the major fights on the radio. So vivid was the announcing style of Don Dunphy that Collins felt he was actually in the arena for the event being broadcast. He was able to visualize every punch thrown, each knockdown. He learned the meaning of certain code words. For example, when a fighter was described as being "game," Collins knew that he was on his way to defeat.

As a GI during the Korean War, he became ill one day and ran a fever

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of one hundred and four. Yet he managed virtually to crawl out of a hospital bed in San Diego and make it to an enlisted man's club. He arrived in time to watch Rocky Marciano knock out "Jersey Joe" Walcott in the first round of their televised championship rematch. Collins had his favorites, Ali, of course, and Henry Armstrong. Also a middleweight few remembered named Johnny Bratton. The Chicago fighter had seal black shoulder-length hair that bounced each time he hit or got hit. He was not much of a puncher, but he had a style that was clean and pure, more so than any boxer Collins had ever seen.

Collins loved to *talk* fights, at saloons, or on social occasions when he ran into another enthusiast. He would always steer the conversation around to the "phantom punch" Ali used to defeat Sonny Liston in their Lewiston, Maine, rematch. ("I've watched that tape a dozen times and I still haven't seen the punch.") He made sure to mention that he was actually there at the Garden for the first Ali-Frazier fight. In the same arena, he had seen Roberto Duran, an unknown teenager from the back streets of Panama, literally spit at the then champion Ken Buchanan of Scotland before knocking him out in the thirteenth round. To Collins, the very names of past fighters were like poetry...Charles "Bobo" Olson, Kid Gavilan, Harry Greb, Benny Leonard, and the southpaw Lou Tendler. Al "Bummy" Davis, Tony Canzoneri, and Arturo Godoy. Kid Chocolate, Pipino Cuevas, and Willie Pastrano. Though he admired Evander Holyfield, he winced each time the heavyweight was introduced as Evander "The Real Deal" Holyfield. Was this a plea for his authenticity? Collins had always felt the nickname struck a wrong note.

COLLINS HAD LOST his wife in a car accident. In the years following her death, he had met and enjoyed the company of several women. But such was the depth of his love for his wife that he had never once thought of remarrying. He raised their one child alone. They lived in a small house on Long Island; from time to time, Colleen would join her father in the den and watch the fights with him. Now and then he made stray comments about the sport.

"When you have a guy hurt, step back and let him fall. Keep punching and you're liable to revive him."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In fighting a southpaw, he instructed his daughter, the trick was to circle to the left of his front foot.

"That takes away his left hook.... And always throw punches in combinations. You don't throw one and then step back to admire your handiwork. That leaves you vulnerable to a counterpunch."

On occasion, as Collins watched a fight, he would unconsciously duck punches, cover up his ribs and throw a punch when he saw an opening.

"Dad, you're not in the ring," his daughter would remind him.

When a fight turned vicious — or more than most — he would say to her, "Maybe you shouldn't watch this."

"It's all right," she would assure him. "I enjoy it."

He did not try too hard to dissuade her. It was comforting for Collins to have her beside him in what he had come to think of — since his wife's death — as an empty house.

But now and then he asked himself: What am I doing? Why am I letting her watch two men try to pound each other into oblivion? He tried to justify this by telling himself — and her — that it was a sport. The best fighters were great athletes, their movements balletic. They rarely got hurt. But he could not think of too many examples to prove his point. Ali himself had had at least five fights too many. No one could claim that he had walked away from the sport uninjured. So there was a part of Collins that felt awful about exposing his daughter to such carnage, especially since so many of the televised fights were one-sided. Managers served up bloated, over-the-hill "tomato cans" to fatten up the records of rising stars. At a cocktail party, Collins had once met a psychiatrist, a father and presumably a learned man, who was also a boxing fan. As a hobby, he had actually managed several fighters.

"How do we justify our interest in this bloody sport?" he'd asked the man. "Two men trying to destroy each other?"

The psychiatrist, who seemed not to have a worry in the world, had shrugged.

"We don't," he said.

His response was of interest to Collins, but it was not terribly helpful.

Collins had constructed a scenario in which his daughter would always be with him. She would travel with him to China, a dream of his — and she would look after him when he was unable to take care of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

himself. (He had never considered the unfairness of such an arrangement.) As it happened, Colleen enrolled in a junior college nearby where she met and fell in love with the first boy she had dated seriously. They married, and before they'd graduated, moved to La Jolla so that they could be near the young man's family. Rather than remain alone in an isolated area, Collins, in his sixties, sold the house and moved back to New York City where he had been born. Though Manhattan offered a feast of activity, Collins took advantage of very little of it. He'd once enjoyed the theater, but the ticket prices seemed annoyingly high, and it became increasingly difficult for him to hear the stage dialogue. So he stopped going to see plays. His few friends died. He kept in touch with his daughter, but neither had much of a phone style. They ended each conversation by saying "I love you." But the exchanges were brief and strained. Perhaps he felt she had deserted him.

Though Collins's life had begun to narrow down, his interest in the fights never wavered. He saw one boxing program at an arena on Staten Island and had been surprised — and frightened — by the unruliness of the crowd. His age no doubt contributed to a feeling of vulnerability. But he recalled the fight nights of his youth as being convivial affairs. Men dressed for such occasions. They greeted each other warmly and exchanged cigars. There were catcalls but they were in a different spirit, jocular, never obscene. To throw refuse into the ring because of a disputed decision was unthinkable. It was a gentleman's sport. Or such was his recollection.

Collins was content now to kick back in his recliner and watch the fights at home on a television screen. More programs than ever were available on the cable channels. Once in a while he caught a gem, such as the unheralded bout in question – the powerful Irishman pitted against the rangy and skillful Jamaican. Halfway along in the brutal ten-round match, there was an expectation that the fight would taper off. It was impossible for the fighters to continue at that level. But if anything, the action intensified. As if by silent agreement, the fighters took turns battering each other. The Irish fighter threw body punches with such force it seemed the Jamaican would be cut in two. And then, seemingly at the point of collapse, the slender Jamaican would find the energy and will-power to fire back with a blizzard of slicing punches to the head. They were thrown with speed that was impossible to follow. This was the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pattern for ten furious rounds. Collins winced when the Irish fighter threw body blows; he covered up as if to block the scissor-like combinations of the Jamaican. Like the men in the ring, he began to breathe through his mouth. Though the fighters were relatively unknown, the announcers, who were hoarse with excitement, made comparisons to the legendary fights of the past...Sadler/Pep...Leonard/Hearns...the Ali/Frazier fights...Zale/Graziano.... When the bell sounded at the end of the tenth and final round, the referee raised the hands of both exhausted fighters. The fight was declared a draw. The crowd roared its approval.

There were two other tenants on the second floor of Collins's brownstone. One was a stout and cheerful nurse in her fifties, the other a retired seventy-year-old City Hall worker, who favored checkered suits and wore a fedora at a rakish angle. Three days after the fight, Miss Simms, the nurse, passed Collins's door and heard the sound of a daytime soap opera on the television. She had not seen him at the corner coffee shop for several days, which was unusual. It was possible he'd gone somewhere and forgotten to turn off the set, but she had never known him to do any traveling. Mr. Collins liked his privacy — she was aware of that — but something prompted her to ring his doorbell to say hello and see how he was getting along. When there was no response, she became uneasy. At the newsstand, she ran into Mr. Adler, the jaunty City Hall retiree. After an exchange of pleasantries, she expressed her concern to him.

"Come to think of it," he said, "I haven't seen him around either."

The two decided to notify Antoine, the bartender at the Greek restaurant, who had a passkey to each of the brownstone apartments. All three mounted the stairs to the second floor. Antoine rang the bell several times, then rapped at the door. When no one came to answer, he used the passkey. The door swung open and there was Collins in his recliner, hunched over in a fighter's crouch. His nose was flattened, his lips puffed up, his ears battered and misshapen. There were mounds of swollen flesh around his eyes, which had become little slits, giving him a simian look.

"Oh, my God," said a horrified Miss Simms.

"We'd better call 911,"said Antoine.

Mr. Adler removed his fedora.

"Poor bastard," he said. "I hope he gave as good as he got."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Perhaps you're familiar already with Edward S. Ellis's Steam Man of the Prairies, *a dime novel from the 1860s. Or maybe you read Harry Enton's sequels, starring the inventor Frank Reade. No? Surely you remember Professor Archibald Campion's mechanical man Boilerplate from the 1893 World Expo? If you do, then you've probably fallen for a very convincing Internet hoax site at www.bigredhair.com/boilerplate.*

Ron Goulart will now set us straight on Victorian automata and other matters of great importance to Harry Challenge. Mr. Goulart kindly took time out from his current work on The Comic Book Encyclopedia *to regale us with this yarn about an American in London.*

The Incredible Steam Man

By Ron Goulart

THE PRETTY DARK-HAIRED young woman met Harry Challenge at Waterloo Station and didn't try to kill him until half an hour later.

It was a chill, foggy afternoon in the early winter of 1899, and Harry had just arrived in London after clearing up a case involving a vampire cult that had been flourishing in a Somerset village. The young woman, wearing a checkered cloak over a long-skirted dark suit and smiling thinly, was waiting on the platform as his train pulled in.

He stepped from his compartment, carrying his single suitcase and smoking one of the thin cigars he favored. Harry was a clean-shaven man in his early thirties, lean and a shade above average height. Folded in the breast pocket of his dark business suit was the cablegram from New York that had brought him to London.

It read: *Dear Son: Quit resting on your laurels and your backside in the wilds of merry England. Get yourself to London right away. A crackpot scientist named Hulbert Beresford wants us to find his runaway automaton. He's got lots of dough. Let him know when you'll arrive and*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the poor mutt will meet you. Your devoted father, the Challenge International Detective Agency.

Harry had walked about ten yards along the misty platform when the young woman stepped into his path. "You look about what I imagined Harry Challenge would look like. Are you he?" she asked with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm.

"I am, yeah."

"Frankly, I think my father's making a terrible mistake hiring you," she told him. "Scotland Yard is much better prepared to handle this sort of matter. But my dear father, being eccentric and a bit dotty, insists on throwing his money away on a overrated American inquiry agency."

Harry exhaled smoke, grinned, tipped his bowler hat. "This is the nicest welcome I've had in many a month," he confided. "Usually I'm met only by cute little blonde girls with baskets of flowers or a nattily dressed mayor with the key to the city. You're Beresford's daughter, huh?"

"I'm Emily Beresford," she said. "And you're extremely rude, Mr. Challenge."

He nodded in agreement. "Being insulted does tend to bring out the lout in me, Miss Beresford. Did you come to Waterloo Station simply to offer your critique, or are you planning to escort me to your dad?"

"I have a hansom cab waiting outside." Turning, she started walking briskly along the platform, her cloak flapping.

Harry followed.

As the hansom cab rattled along through the foggy London streets, Harry asked, "Thackeray?"

The inventor's daughter gave a faint sigh. "My father's favorite author," she explained. "He met him once in his youth. Why one would name a steam-driven automaton after an overrated and outdated novelist is beyond me."

"Thackeray has a certain ring to it. And it's less controversial than naming him Oscar Wilde."

"You'd probably have christened him Fritz Katzenjammer."

"That's catchy, too. How did Thackeray come to run away?"

Some of the heavy fog seemed to be seeping into the cab. Emily

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tightened her cloak around her. "The steam man didn't initially run away. Someone stole him."

"When was this?"

"Nearly a month ago."

"How?" Harry took a puff of his cheroot.

"My father's laboratory, which is attached to the rear of our house, was broken into and Thackeray carried off."

"Where were you and your father when that happened?"

"Attending the opening of a show of paintings by Jeremy Otterbridge at the Gifford Gallery."

Glancing out the window of the swaying cab, Harry spotted a large, bright new poster among those slapped on a siding. It announced, in bold type, that none other than the Great Lorenzo and his Internationally Acclaimed Astounding Magical Show was now playing at the Royal Serpentine Theatre. "Well, my old friend Lorenzo is in town," he observed. "Have to look him up soon as — "

"Would this inane comment of yours have a blessed thing to do with my father's dilemma, Mr. Challenge?"

"Nothing at all, nope," he admitted, exhaling cigar smoke. "Now then — your father didn't call in Scotland Yard?"

Emily said, "He's very secretive about his work and, being a very stubborn man as well, he refused to consult the police or the Yard. He's been trying to find Thackeray on his own."

"But now he's hired us. Why?"

"There has been a new development," she answered. "That's why he decided he needed outside help. I only hope you're up to the task."

Harry exhaled cigar smoke. "What sort of new development?"

The cab swayed as it rounded a corner. "My father will explain all to you, Mr. Challenge."

"Do you have any suspicions as to who might've swiped your automaton?"

"I believe it was foreign agents."

"From where?"

"As you know, if you keep up with international news at all, there's a new war that's broken out between the two middle European countries of Outavia and Cintavania," the young woman said. "Some weeks ago, a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Baron Sonifero, who's an Outavian diplomat stationed here in London, called upon my father. He'd somehow gotten wind of the steam man and queried my father as to whether automatons like Thackeray could be used on the battlefield. Father, disdaining any such martial use of his work, threw the baron out."

"You think Sonifero came back and stole Thackeray."

"It's certainly a possibility, but you're the detective, Mr. Challenge. It's up to you to determine the truth."

A moment later the cab pulled up at a narrow, three-story brick house at the edge of the Bloomsbury district. Harry paid the driver, despite the protest of Emily, and they entered the chill, shadowy house.

"Father should be home shortly," the young woman said, taking off her cloak. "You can wait in the parlor."

It was in the parlor that she took two shots at him.

A moment after Harry pushed through the beaded curtain and crossed the threshold of the cluttered parlor, the grandfather clock, standing crowded between the glass-fronted bookcases and a whatnot stand dominated by a collection of small japanned boxes, struck the hour of four. It bonged in a reverberating, temple-gong sort of way.

"Yes, of course," murmured Emily out in the hallway.

Walking rather stiffly, she entered the shadowy parlor and, skirting a plump purple ottoman, slid open a drawer in a marble-topped, claw-footed table.

"What time," Harry started to inquire, "do you expect your father to — oops!"

The dark-haired young woman, who'd extracted a derringer from the drawer, had the compact weapon aimed directly at Harry. "You are an enemy of progress," she charged in a droning voice. "Thus, you must cease to be."

She fired the gun.

Harry had by that time dodged to his right, knocking over an Oriental screen and causing it to topple a potted aspidistra off another claw-footed table.

Emily's second shot also missed, putting a hole through the crown of his bowler hat, which had fallen off of its place atop the tumbled table.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Before she could fire again, Harry, crouched low, dived toward Emily. He grabbed her gun hand, forcing her arm downward. With his free hand he aimed and delivered an uppercut to her petite jaw.

Eyes rolling suddenly upward, Emily sighed, swayed, fell over the ottoman and sprawled out on a rather surly looking tigerskin rug.

"See here, young man, that's hardly the way to treat my daughter," protested someone in the hallway. "Admittedly, the dear girl can be deucedly aggravating at times, yet — "

"You're Beresford?" Picking up the unconscious young woman, Harry deposited her, fairly gently, on a mauve divan.

"I am." The lanky, middle-aged man in the Norfolk suit stepped into the parlor. "And you, sir?"

"Harry Challenge," he informed his client. "You hired our detective agency. Your daughter met my train, brought me here, and then tried to knock me off."

"That's decidedly odd," he said, crossing toward his daughter. "Emily is a very independent young woman, but, like myself, is a dedicated pacifist. She has never before, to the best of my knowledge, shot a single soul."

"Could be, as in this case, she tried and missed."

After stroking his impressive gray beard, Beresford bent to take hold of Emily's wrist. "Pulse seems normal." He let go the wrist and placed his palm against her forehead. "I can't, old man, imagine what prompted her to try to shoot you. For that matter, Challenge, I was unaware that she possessed a gun."

Bending, Harry picked up the derringer and held it out. "This isn't yours?"

The inventor didn't accept the proffered weapon. He took a backward step, giving a negative shake of his head. "It is not, no."

Emily moaned. "Whatever," she murmured, "whatever has taken place?" She sat up, eyelids fluttering. "What's that disagreeable odor? It smells as though someone has been celebrating Guy Fawkes Day indoors."

"You apparently, my dear," explained her father quietly, "attempted to slay poor Mr. Challenge."

"I did no such thing." She frowned at Harry, indignant. "How can you have formed such a ludicrous notion, Mr. Challenge?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Mostly, Miss Beresford, it was your pointing this thing at me and pulling the trigger a few times." He held the derringer toward her.

She flinched. "Nonsense, I detest firearms."

Dropping the gun on a marble tabletop, he scooped up his injured hat. Poking his forefinger at the hole, he said, "This is a bullet hole."

"I...dear me, I...I seem to have a vague recollection of using that gun...but...."

"When the clock yonder struck four, you went into some sort of trance."

"Surely it isn't four o'clock yet?" She consulted the watch pinned to her blouse. "Why, it is."

Beresford scowled. "What the devil has been going on here?"

"Somebody apparently hypnotized your daughter," answered Harry, "and instructed her to kill me."

Beresford had changed into a smoking jacket of a decidedly Oriental pattern and perched a somewhat floppy crimson fez atop his sparse gray hair.

Harry was sitting forward on a plump Morris chair that matched his client's. They were both in the large drawing room. The fog outside the narrow windows had grown thicker and the fire crackling in the small stone fireplace did little to alleviate the chill.

"Before we go further into my reasons for hiring your detective agency," said the bearded inventor, "I would like very much to hear your advice as to how to counter what's been done to Emily. One can't, you know, have one's daughter going about taking pot shots at people."

"Inconvenient, yeah." Harry lighted a fresh thin cigar. "While you were changing, I took the liberty of using your telephone to track down my friend, the Great Lorenzo. There are some who argue that he isn't, as he claims, the world's greatest magician, but Lorenzo is a crackerjack hypnotist."

"Can this Lorenzo chap reverse what's been done to my daughter?"

Harry answered, "He assures me he can. I arranged to convey your daughter to consult with him this evening at 7:00. If that suits you and Miss Beresford."

"You won't be dragging her to some low music hall, Challenge?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The Great Lorenzo never plays low music halls," the detective assured him. "Besides, we'll be calling on him before he leaves for tonight's performance."

"At his hotel?"

Harry flicked ashes into the nearest potted palm pot. "Actually he's a house guest of Mrs. Denis Edgeware Rider."

Beresford sat up. "The famed novelist and author of *The Clew of the Red Rose*?"

"That Mrs. Denis Edgeware Rider, yep."

From the nearby music room Emily began playing a mournful tune on the spinet. After a few seconds she sang, "They found Lord Dowlish cold and dead. He had put a pistol shot into his head."

Raising his voice, Harry requested, "Tell me about your missing automaton."

CROUCHED ON the slanting skylight of the inventor's workshop was a plump calico cat. Paws folded under her chin, she gazed speculatively down as Harry and Beresford made their way into the room.

There was a Bunsen burner flickering on the black workbench closest to the far wall. Hanging in the corner, suspended from a wrought-iron hook, was a time-yellowed articulated skeleton, and on a camp stool near it sat the copper torso of an automaton. Wooden boxes jammed with tools rested atop the other two workbenches along with heavy spools of thick wire, spills of glass tubing, three different sized kettles, an overcoat, a floppy felt hat, and a bunch of silk violets thrust into an empty ginger beer bottle.

Looming large on one buff-colored wall was an ornately framed oil painting of Buffalo Bill Cody in a style somewhat like that of Whistler.

"Admirer of the Wild West, are you?" inquired Harry.

"That daub," said Beresford disdainfully. "Emily, who's quite taken with the painter, insisted on my buying it and displaying it here."

"It's the work of Jeremy Otterbridge?"

The bearded man blinked. "Don't tell me you recognize that whelp's inane and borrowed style?"

"Nope, but your daughter mentioned him earlier. Told me you were at a showing of his paintings the afternoon Thackeray disappeared."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Two losses that bloody day. My invaluable automaton and the outrageous price I paid for that dreadful canvas of Otterbridge's."

Settling on an unoccupied stool, Harry requested, "Tell me about Thackeray."

From a file drawer, Beresford withdrew a portfolio. Clearing a space on a workbench, he opened it. "Here are my notes and drawings pertaining to the steam man."

Harry stood, joining the inventor.

The top mechanical drawing showed an automaton, vaguely human in form, who stood seven feet tall. His metal head resembled a large canister with eyes, nose, and mouth. The next drawing showed the interior of Thackeray's barrel chest, revealing an intricacy of gears and levers as well as a large copper container to hold boiling water.

Turning to a schematic drawing of the automaton's head, Beresford tapped it. "I'm quite proud of the fact that Thackeray has the power of speech, as well as hearing."

"The guy can talk?"

The proud inventor nodded. "Thus far he has a vocabulary of several thousand words," he answered. "Had he not been abducted I would've added more useful words and phrases to his vocabulary."

"How exactly does that work?"

"Much of my process must remain my secret, Challenge," said Beresford. "However, I can tell you that I drew on and improved some of the innovations of your American Thomas Alva Edison — plus some rather insightful suggestions provided by my novelist friend Bertie Wells, who has an astonishing grasp of science. Perhaps you're aware of his scientific romances?"

"Yep."

"Another of Thackeray's advantages is that he is capable of thought." He showed Harry a drawing of the metal man dressed up in valet's livery. "It is my intention to promote my Beresford Servatons as servants to perform an assortment of household chores. That will eventually allow our present servant class to move upward, permitting them to gain a more thorough education, and eventually leave mindless drudgery exclusively to my steam creatures. However, some war mongers have — "

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"As I understand it, the Outavian ambassador thinks your automatons can be used as soldiers."

Sighing, the inventor shut the portfolio. "Alas, yes," he said. "It's my contention that they've kidnapped Thackeray and have modified him to become frightfully aggressive."

"Is that possible?"

Nodding sadly, Beresford reached into the portfolio and withdrew a fistful of newspaper cuttings. "I fear foreign agents have done just that. They've changed poor Thackeray into a killing machine and are testing him in London."

The clippings were all from the *London Times* over the past three weeks. They described a series of brutal murders that had been taking place in the Limehouse district. Because of the vicious nature of his crimes, the unknown killer had been dubbed the Limehouse Mangler. The police seemed to have no solid clews and the one possible eyewitness had only seen the Mangler from a distance on a deeply foggy night. He'd described him as "a huge bloke, don't you know, wearin' an enormous plaid overcoat."

After Harry studied the sheaf of clippings, he returned them to Beresford. "People are getting killed," he said. "If I can't track Thackeray down in the next two days, I'll have to talk to somebody at Scotland Yard."

"But, see here, Challenge, that — "

"If the Mangler is your wayward automaton, Beresford, it may take a whole crew of men to run him to ground," he said. "There are a few things I can try on my own, but then it's got to be Scotland Yard."

Off in the music room Emily was still playing mournful tunes.

The carriage turned off the Tottenham Court Road, went halfway round a small park, clattered to a stop in front of a narrow gray stone three-story townhouse.

Harry alighted, reached up to pay the top-hatted driver. "Allow me, Miss Beresford," he offered, holding out his hand toward her.

"Simply because I foolishly allowed myself, Mr. Challenge, to be hypnotized," Emily informed him, ignoring his proffered assistance and stepping free of the carriage unaided, "in no way indicates that I am incapable of fending for myself in most situations."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Grinning, he made a slight bow in her direction before starting up the brick steps of Mrs. Denis Edgeware Rider's home.

The place had been electrified and the front windows on all the floors glowed warm yellow through the chill evening mist.

Harry was two steps below the carved oaken door when it silently swung inward. He crossed the threshold into the long, brightly lit hallway.

Behind him, Emily said, "I sincerely hope your magician crony isn't going to bore us with cheap parlor tricks."

From out of the parlor on their right stepped a portly middle-aged man in his shirt sleeves. "My tricks, dear lady, I can assure you, are far from cheap," he announced, "as the crowned heads of numerous nations will gladly attest if pressed upon the matter. Good evening, Harry, my boy."

"What's that you're wielding, Lorenzo?"

"A carpet sweeper," the plump magician replied, returning to the parlor and leaning it against the wall. "Quite a useful invention." He pointed a gloved finger toward the ceiling. "When dear Estella is in the throes of creation with one of her detective romances, I help out with a few household chores."

From above came the metallic patter of a typewriting machine.

"Lorenzo, this is the young lady I mentioned," said Harry as Emily, reluctantly, entered the parlor. "Miss Emily Beresford."

"My full name is the Great Lorenzo." Producing a bouquet of yellow roses out of thin air, the magician presented them to the young woman.

Emily accepted the flowers, then dropped them onto the nearest marble-topped table next to a bell glass that sheltered a stuffed owl. "Thank you, sir," she said crisply. "Now, can you spare me further items from your bag of tricks and get down to business?"

"Most certainly, my dear." Smiling, the Great Lorenzo pointed a gloved forefinger at the discarded blooms. "Begone."

After a faint popping sound, green smoke swirled up, soon surrounding the bouquet. When the smoke cleared, the roses were gone.

Emily frowned, gave a disapproving sigh.

Gesturing toward a claw-footed armchair, the magician invited, "Pray sit down by the fire, Miss Beresford, and we'll proceed."

She took the indicated seat. "Is there any danger you'll botch this, causing me irreparable harm, Mr. Lorenzo?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"As Harry will assure you, has he not already, the Great Lorenzo never botches anything." He lowered himself into a bentwood chair that faced hers.

Harry moved to stand just behind his friend.

"I must inform you, although Mr. Challenge believes otherwise, that I am still not completely convinced I actually was hypnotized."

"A skeptical attitude is a valuable asset for coping with life in a great metropolitan city such as London." From a pocket of his checkered waistcoat, Lorenzo extracted a gold medallion on a gold chain. It had a bit of turquoise mounted at its exact center. "This, my dear, happens to be an ancient bit of jewelry recently unearthed in Egypt at the site of the pyramid of Ibis II," he explained softly, holding it by the chain.

"Really, now."

"Yes, indeed. It is a true and absolutely authentic relic of a vanished empire. I would like you, Miss Beresford, to watch the stone as it moves, slowly and repeatedly, back and forth, back and forth."

"This strikes me as being nothing more than simpleminded mumbo — " Emily slumped in her chair, eyelids drifting shut.

"We shall commence with a few simple instructions," Lorenzo told her. "Any previous orders given you while in any and all previous hypnotic states are hereby canceled. Do you understand?"

Emily, eyes closed tight, grimacing, shoulders hunching, answered, "I — Yes, I understand."

"You are henceforth under no other instructions but mine. Tell me, Miss Beresford, when you were previously hypnotized?"

After a few silent seconds, she replied, "It was two days before poor Thackeray was taken from us."

Lorenzo glanced back inquiringly at Harry.

"The automaton," he said.

"You were told not to reveal any details of what happened to you, but, as already noted, those rules no long *pertain*. Who hypnotized you?"

Grimacing again, Emily answered, "It was...it was Jeremy Otterbridge."

The magician nodded. "What were his orders to you?"

"To make certain my father and I attended his gallery showing on a certain day and at a specified time."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What about taking potshots at Harry?"

"Jeremy hypnotized me a second time," recalled the hypnotized young woman. "I was to pick up Mr. Challenge at the train station, convey him to our home. When the clock struck four in the parlor I was to take out a gun and kill him."

"Why, my dear?"

"Harry Challenge is a spy, planning to kill my dear father and steal his plans."

"Where did the gun come from?"

"It will be in the drawer when needed."

Again glancing up at Harry, the Great Lorenzo asked, "Anything else?"

"Does she know who's got the automaton?"

"What is Otterbridge's interest in Thackeray?"

"I don't know, Mr. Lorenzo."

"Do you know the current whereabouts of Thackeray?"

"No, I do not."

"You'll go to sleep now. When I snap my fingers in a few moments, you'll awake," he informed her. "You'll remember everything you've told us. You'll be unable to be hypnotized in the future by anyone but me." He coughed into his hand. "You'll be forever certain that I am indeed the world's greatest magician and that Harry Challenge is a decent chap."

"You could've added that I was the world's greatest detective," said Harry, moving out from behind the chair.

"We can only stretch the young lady's credulity so far." Lorenzo got to his feet. "I've heard of Otterbridge. Were you aware that the lad was practicing espionage on the side?"

Harry took out a thin cigar. "Nope, but I sure as hell am going to find out more about him."

"Perhaps I can be of some assistance, Mr. Challenge." A tall handsome woman of about fifty was standing in the parlor doorway. She was dressed in a long velvet gown, and a necklace of real pearls circled her slender neck. "I'm Mrs. Denis Edgeware Rider and it's an extreme pleasure to meet a *real* detective."

"You can offer a helpful suggestion to Harry, Estella my dear?"

"But of course, Renzo dearest," she assured him as she came into the parlor.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

The Tartarus Club stood on a narrow lane off Great Russell Street. When Harry arrived there at exactly nine that evening, the earlier mist had turned to a light drizzle. The nearest street lamp was blurred, its light fuzzy.

The large brass knocker, in the shape of an especially unattractive gargoyle, had been padded so that it produced only a gentle tapping.

Silently, a full two minutes after Harry knocked, the heavy door opened a few inches. "This is a private club, sir," a small, much-wrinkled and highly bald servant squinted out to inform him.

"That I well know," Harry assured him. "I have an appointment with Sir Ambrose Beggarstaff, arranged by Mrs. Denis Edgeware Rider."

The hairless man straightened some. "Ah, yes, the gifted authoress of such splendid novels as *The Clew of the Dowerless Maiden* and many another thrilling piece of literature." Extending a time-freckled hand that held a small silver tray out into the drizzly night, he requested, "Your card, sir."

Harry produced one from a vest pocket, depositing it on the sparkling tray.

The venerable servant went away, shutting the thick oaken door, silently, on Harry.

After three minutes or so, the door opened a few inches wider than previously. "Sir Ambrose will see you in the Shakespeare Room, sir."

Harry followed the slow-moving man down a dim corridor past several gas-lit rooms and shadowy alcoves. In some rooms gentlemen sat reading *The London Times*, *Punch*, and *The Strand*. In one dark-paneled room a billiard game was going on, though the balls made no sound as they collided.

The Shakespeare Room was better lighted than any he'd seen thus far. The books crowding the wall-high bookcases were several centuries old, probably from the days of Queen Elizabeth.

Harry entered. "Sir Ambrose?"

"Obviously or old Truett wouldn't have delivered you here, Challenge." Beggarstaff was about sixty, lean, short, and with curly dead-white hair and shadow-rimmed eyes. He was wearing a rumpled gray suit. "Before you sit down, young fellow, I assume dear Estella Rider informed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you that my consulting fee is fifty pounds. Are you clear on that matter?"

Settling into a wide leather armchair, Harry grinned. "Actually she told me it was twenty-five."

Beggarstaff gave a chesty chuckle. "For established customers, to be sure," he replied. "Estella has been drawing on my near-encyclopedic knowledge of the criminal mind and the London underworld for many a year, Challenge, ever since she established her reputation with *The Clew of the Left-Handed Glove.*"

Harry drew his wallet from the breast pocket of his coat. He extracted five ten-pound notes, setting them on his knee. "It was Mrs. Rider's notion, because of this encyclopedic knowledge of yours, that you might be able to make some suggestions as to the present whereabouts of a missing automaton. The mechanism is named Thackeray, invented and constructed by Hulbert Beresford and swiped from his home laboratory a month since."

"If you'll pass the fee over, Challenge, we can commence."

Rising slightly out of the deep chair, Harry handed across the money. "Do you know an artist named Jeremy Otterbridge who —"

"What I'll do," cut in the pale Beggarstaff, "is pose two questions of my own. As soon as you determine the answers to them, I venture to predict that you shall find your ill-named mechanical man."

Harry nodded. "Okay."

"First, who has Jeremy Otterbridge — a mediocre painter, I might add — who has he been riding with every morning in Rotten Row for several weeks past? Secondly, is this relationship a motivating factor in the young ninny's non-artistic activities?" After clearing his throat, he resumed. "Next, why did Otterbridge rent, three some weeks ago, the long-deserted Copperfield Blacking Factory on the edge of the Limehouse district?"

"That's *three* questions."

"I find myself in a generous mood this evening." He made a shooing motion with his pale left hand. "You may leave."

Harry left.

The next evening was fog-ridden and cold. Every now and then a small flurry of fat snowflakes came drifting down through the darkening sky.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Their carriage made its way slowly and cautiously through the London streets and lanes.

"You sure, Harry my boy, that you wouldn't care for a scone?" inquired the Great Lorenzo.

"It's one of the few things in life about which I'm absolutely certain, yes." Leaning back, he lit one of his thin cigars.

"If you'll pardon me, I'll have just one more." When the magician clapped his gloved hands, a large scone, encrusted with plump currants, materialized just above them. Catching hold of it, he took a bite. Crisp crumbs flickered down to land on his thick woolen muffler. "So you found out who the duplicitous Otterbridge, painter and mesmerist, is canoodling with?"

Harry nodded. "Helga Sonifero, beloved only daughter of Baron Sonifero, Outavia's ambassador to Great Britain."

"Ah, the very fellow who wants to convert Beresford's automatons into field soldiers for their current war."

"That Baron Sonifero, yeah."

"What clever detective work on your part produced this information?"

"I found out where Otterbridge was riding this morning, went there, rented a horse and watched."

"A stratagem worthy of Sherlock Holmes," observed Lorenzo, brushing scone crumbs from his ample sideburns and then his nubby muffler, "or Martin Hewitt. You're certain it was indeed Helga Sonifero the villainous lad was galloping around with?"

"She gave me her card."

"Oh, so? How'd you manage that?"

"Helga was so grateful when I plucked her free from the saddle of her runaway horse," Harry explained, exhaling smoke, "that she handed over the card and suggested that I drop in at the embassy some afternoon for tea. She further mentioned that her grateful pappy, the baron, would probably give me a medal. Whether gold or silver was not specified."

"Where was Otterbridge during your daring rescue, my boy?"

"He had the misfortune of falling off his horse at about that time."

"You had nothing to do with that."

"Hardly anything."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Great Lorenzo clapped his hands again. "I won't indulge in another scone," he announced.

"Wise decision."

"But a small chocolate éclair won't — " The plump magician suddenly groaned, bending forward.

"What's wrong, Lorenzo?" Harry put his hand on his friend's shoulder.

Breathing slowly through his mouth, Lorenzo replied, "As you know, Harry, I am sometimes visited with visions of the future."

"You had one just now?"

"I did." He straightened up. "It was about you."

"Something unfortunate I'd guess."

"I saw a huge fellow made of glittering metal rending you limb from limb and then strewing your remains in a foul, and foggy, Limehouse alley."

Harry said, "In the past your glimpses of the future were okay in a general way but never too accurate when it came to specific details."

The Great Lorenzo nodded agreement. "Since we're at this moment heading for the Copperfield Blacking Factory, I'm assuming my vision has something to do with that," he said. "If the missing steam man is being kept there, you'd best be very careful. He may attempt to kill you, Harry."

"I was already planning on being careful, Lorenzo, but thanks for the hint."

"Would that I could accompany you on your nocturnal investigation of the place. Alas, hundreds of devotees of the magical arts are counting on seeing my nonpareil performance in less than an hour."

"That's all right, Lorenzo," Harry assured him. "You did enough by getting Mrs. Rider to loan us her carriage."

"Should I receive any further visions, I'll abandon my devoted audience and rush to the rescue."

"Probably won't be necessary." Harry grinned.

By the time Harry jumped from the roof of the rundown hotel to the nearby roof of the blacking factory several feet below, the night snow had intensified.

When he landed atop the flat roof of the supposedly deserted factory,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his booted right foot slipped on the thin dusting of new snow and he lost his balance momentarily and skidded toward the edge.

"Damn," he mentioned as he came to a stop in time to avoid a plummet of three stories.

He was dressed in dark trousers and a navy blue pea jacket, a dark gray knit cap on his head. The increasingly heavy snowfall freckled his clothes with spots of white as he made his way toward the skylight. It was exactly where the plans he'd consulted earlier had indicated.

The uppermost floor of the blacking factory, viewed through the snow-blurred glass, was dark. In cautiously circling the grimy brick building earlier, Harry had spotted glimmers of light from the ground floor.

After taking off his boots and depositing them in two of his coat pockets, he very quietly lifted the window. Waiting a moment, listening, he then lowered himself into the darkness below.

Harry hit, with a minimum of noise, on the wooden plank floor. He remained where he'd landed, allowing his eyes to adjust to the surrounding darkness.

All around were stacked wooden crates. No doubt they had COPPERFIELD BLACKING...NONE BETTER stenciled in bold letters on their sides.

Inhaling slowly, Harry made his way through the storeroom, easing toward the stairway. The place still smelled strongly of the polish that had once been manufactured here.

The next floor, also dark, had been given over to offices.

As Harry moved in stocking feet toward the next stairway, he became aware of conversation drifting up from below.

" — ails you? You seem extremely nervy this evening," a voice with a slight Outavian accent was saying.

"You'd be off your feed, too, Baron, had you fallen off your bloody steed earlier in the day."

"According to my dear daughter, Jeremy, you are not only clumsy but cowardly," continued Baron Sonifero. "A total stranger, and not even a gentleman I suspect, had to save Helga when her mount bolted."

"I happen to be an excellent horseman, sir, which is unusual among gifted painters," replied Otterbridge in his thin nasal voice. "However, that uncouth chap — and I strongly suspect he was an American — more than likely bumped into my horse and caused it to unseat me."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Enough feeble alibis, Jeremy. Help me and the good Dr. Mackinson get Thackeray ready for tonight's test."

"This is another thing that's making me deucedly uneasy, Baron," complained the artist. "I mean to say, don't you know, that one doesn't mind courting some annoyingly independent young lady nor hypnotizing her when the need arises. One doesn't even balk at being a party to the theft of her father's blasted tin man. But, damme, sir, being a party to innocent people being butchered by this mechanical brute — it's simply not the sort of thing a gentleman should be expected to be involved in at all."

"Since you're not a gentleman, but merely a second-rate painter and scapegrace, you needn't worry," the baron told him. "Also keep in mind that you're being well paid."

"Agreed that the pay is quite generous, old man, yet one does have moral qualms."

"I've found his muffler," announced an elderly man. "It had fallen down behind one of my workbenches. A few spots of blood on it, yet I doubt anyone will notice."

"Very good, Dr. Mackinson," said the baron. "Arrange it on Thackeray, then we'll give him his instructions for tonight's field test."

"I do believe that my modifications of that fool Beresford's automaton have achieved our goal," said the doctor. "A very few more forays and then we can ship him to Outavia and begin setting up for mass production of mechanical warriors."

"I really think you fellows are going to have to postpone tonight's test." Harry was at the bottom of the stairs, .38 revolver in his hand.

"Jove, it's the bloke who knocked me off my horse," exclaimed Otterbridge.

"Imbecile," accused the baron. "This man is Harry Challenge of the Challenge International Detective Agency."

Dr. Mackinson was a short, stout, gray-bearded man in a laboratory coat. He was standing beside Thackeray, the huge steam man who was wearing nothing more than a large plaid muffler at the moment. "Kill this intruder," the doctor order the automaton.

Misty steam came hissing out of the venting pipe just above the automaton's coppery left ear. Taking two clanking giant steps in Harry's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

direction, Thackeray said, "You'll forgive me, sir, for I fear I must slaughter you and thereafter tear off some of your appendages."

His voice, emanating from a circular mouth hole in his canister-shaped head, was raspy and echoing. Even so, it sounded quite a bit like that of his creator.

"I'm near certain Beresford would be quite upset were you to do that, Thack," Harry told the steam man. "After all, the ideal servant must know his place and never — "

"Alas, sir," interrupted Thackeray as he thumped closer, "I am no longer a servant. Dr. Mackinson has converted me to a soldier. Mine is not to reason why, as it were, but simply to do what I am ordered to do."

"Excellent," commented Ambassador Sonifero, "you've got him thinking like a perfect fighting man."

Shrugging modestly, Mackinson said, "It only required a few adjustments to convert him from butler to soldier, Baron."

Harry executed an unexpected leap from the bottom step of the stairway. As he twisted in midair, he yanked his revolver out of a coat pocket. "Sorry, Thackeray," he said and, dodging behind the lumbering automaton, he shot him three times in the backside.

"Oh, I say," complained Otterbridge, "that's hardly sporting, old man. Shooting a chap in the back is far from cricket."

Having gone over the plans with Beresford, Harry knew that the mechanical man's boiler was located in his lower back.

"I'm mortally wounded," realized Thackeray, commencing to totter. "Tell them I am happy to have died for my country."

Boiling water came spurting out of the bullet holes, along with hissing swirls of steam.

"Damme," complained the ambassador, "we should have armor-plated his bloody back."

Thackeray, staggering, dropped to his metallic knees. A great steamy sigh came gushing from his mouth and he fell, with a resounding clang, to the factory floor.

Harry fired his revolver yet again, in time to prevent Dr. Mackinson from tugging a pistol from beneath his lab coat.

Thackeray's metal limbs twitched a few times, then he was still. Steamy water burbled out of his back.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Harry gestured with his revolver at Dr. Mackinson, Otterbridge, and the ambassador. "Okay, gents," he suggested, "off we go to Scotland Yard."

THE GREAT LORENZO TOOK a step in the direction of the blazing gas footlights. Pointing a white-gloved hand upward, he told the large attentive audience, "For untold centuries the secret of levitation had been known only to the veiled sorcerers of ancient Chaldea and then, while on an archeological expedition, I became the first person to unearth the venerable manuscript that held the long-lost secret."

Moving back from the footlights, he aimed his ivory-tipped wand at the white-gowned young woman who appeared to be floating unaided high above the theater stage.

"Thus I am able, as you have just witnessed, to elevate Princess Nadja," continued the portly magician. "And, from time to time, I can also transport her to her native Egypt."

The tip of the wand glowed green for a few seconds, green smoke engulfed the floating princess. When it cleared, the floating lady was gone.

The theater audience applauded enthusiastically.

Bowing, he said, "Now, my dear friends, your humble servant, the Great Lorenzo, bids you a most cordial good night." A cloud of emerald mist suddenly surrounded him and he, too, vanished.

Harry had been sitting on a prop trunk backstage watching his friend's show.

"Splinters on the blasted trap door slide," muttered Lorenzo as he returned from the basement of the theater rubbing at his left buttock.

"Can't you remove them by sorcery? The ancient Chaldeans must've worked out a spell for — "

"Tweezers are simpler," said the magician. "I read, with bated breath, all the accounts of your solving of the Limehouse Mangler case. Even the sedate *London Times* gushed."

"And they mentioned the Challenge International Detective Agency three times on the front page. Great publicity."

"Do you think Baron Sonifero will be able to save his neck by claiming diplomatic immunity."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Harry grinned. "I was hired to retrieve Beresford's missing automaton," he reminded Lorenzo. "Everything else was frosting. I'm near certain they'll at least charge Otterbridge and Dr. Mackinson for the murders. The trial ought to be interesting; first time anyone's used a steam man to kill people."

Lorenzo, gingerly, plucked a small splinter from his rump. "Did Beresford express his undying gratitude?"

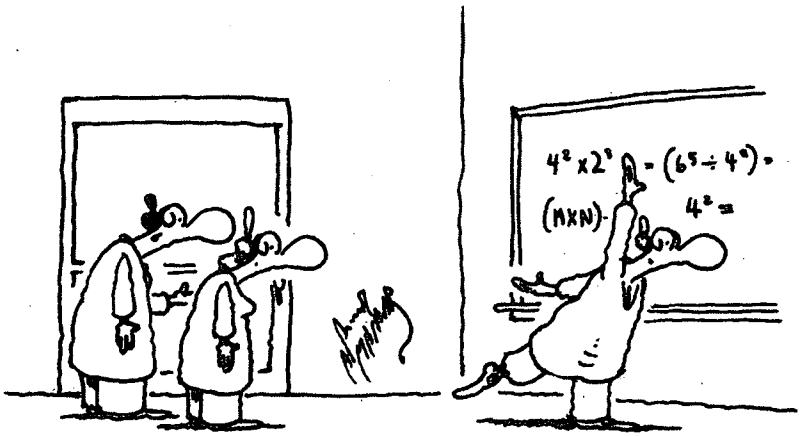
"He paid our fee, but he's unhappy that I had to shoot up Thackeray to stop him from dismantling me."

"Alas, none of us is ever sufficiently appreciated," said Lorenzo. "If you're not doing anything this evening, Harry my boy, Estella Rider would be pleased to have you join us for a late supper. She's exceedingly eager to chat with a sleuth of your reputation."

Harry left the trunk, stretched. "I promised Emily Beresford I'd drop by."

The magician's eyebrows rose slightly. "I was under the impression that the lass didn't think much of you."

"The situation seems to have changed," said Harry.



"At some point his theory becomes so abstract it can only be conveyed using interpretive dance."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Arthur Porges recently saw publication of his first book, a story collection entitled The Mirror and Other Strange Reflections. *That volume includes the short-short story "$1.98," a classic fantasy with a twist concerning the human body. Here's a new story that also probes the mysteries of flesh and bone (particularly the latter), a darker but no less clever look at the subject.*

Luz

(From the Private Journal of Sue Fone, M.D.)

By Arthur Porges

August 20, 2002

NOW THAT I'M ALMOST certainly near the end of my long, quixotic search, a quite stressful one, which at times made me question my sanity, I'm impelled to summarize my findings up to this critical point, and what better date to begin this journal with than my own birthday.

Let me note, at the start, that as Chief Medical Examiner in a large city, nameless for now, I have dealt with countless cases of unnatural deaths, some amazingly bizarre; and, as a Professor of Anatomy at a top medical school, there would seem to be little mystery left for me about the human body, and even less about the skeleton, so fleshless, bare, and unobstructed by messy tissues.

Well, yes and no. There are about 205 bones in a human body, barring the thirty-two teeth, an exclusion I've never cared for. I say "about," since anatomists do not agree on the exact number, probably because some are

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

merely little semi-detached nodules, and not to be compared with fingers, toes, ribs, or femurs. It's like those fussy astronomers who deny Pluto is really a planet. But, what is more to the point, there is one, only one, that has yet to be found — until now. It is known — suggested, rather — by a few vague references, including some in the Talmud, that very long collection of thorny commentaries about Jewish theology and law beloved of Rabbinical scholars for centuries. But I've yet to find anybody who can tell me just where to find it in a jungle of Hebrew.

The bone I refer to, so mysterious, elusive, and even legendary rather than factual, is called Luz, or in some writings, Lues, the latter name dating, no doubt, from a time well before it had a more unpleasant meaning in medicine.

The most complete, definitive account of Luz I know of occurs in 983 pages of small print, *The Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, by the Reverend Ebenezer Cobham Brewer, published in 1870. It's a wonderful collection, perhaps the perfect desert island read, with fascinating entries on such subjects as names of the greatest demons and all the dragons known to mythology.

Brewer's note on Luz quotes a man — I presume he was male — named Lightfoot, but, alas, there are two known to history: John (1602-1675), and Joseph Barber, Bishop of Durham (1828-1889); but which of these is quoted I'm unable to confirm. In any case, here's what Mr. or Reverend Lightfoot wrote:

> "How doth a man revive again in the world to come?" asked Hadrian; and Joshua Ben Hananiah made answer, "From luz in the backbone." He then went on to demonstrate this to him: He took the bone luz, and put it into water, but the water had no action on it; he put it in the fire, but the fire consumed it not; he placed it in a mill, but could not grind it; and laid it on an anvil, but the hammer crushed it not.

Well, obviously Hananiah was not a bad structural engineer, ahead of his time on Strength of Materials, perhaps a Roger Bacon in spirit. But that was then, and this is now.

When I began my quest, half-heartedly, I admit, eight years ago, I looked in all the wrong places: the parts of the skull, before and after they

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

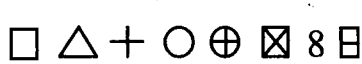
joined; the sternum, fingers, toes, and bigger bones too many to list, all in vain. "Backbone" was the vital clue, and unlike Hananiah, I had modern technology, particularly MRIs and 3-D computer imaging. With those, I made my way down the spinal column, carefully, systematically scrutinizing each vertebra in turn, and so I finally found my first Bone of Life, inside the coccyx, the tailbone, surely an odd place, one almost implying humor or contempt by — whom?

It was a tiny white shiny thing, three millimeters square, but to me it looked like the whole Promised Land. And Hananiah was pretty accurate. My diamond ring could not scratch it, and it took a crucible reaching beyond the melting point of platinum to affect it.

During those eight years, from autopsies and studies of skeletons turned up by archaeologists who consulted me, I was able, secretly, without telling anybody who made my hidden work possible, to acquire nineteen Bones of Life, the latest, which I'm about to study with extra care, as you will understand, from a young woman, Conchita Alvarez, murdered last night by her husband. Here the date of her death is of paramount importance; let me explain why.

Until a few months ago, I had not thought — a truly inexcusable oversight — to examine a luz under a microscope. The surface seemed so shiny and unblemished that I had no reason to magnify it, but once having thought of my old Leitz with its splendid high-power oil-immersion lens, I reconsidered. You may imagine my feelings when under a magnification of 1200, I detected some very faint marks on that apparently flawless white surface.

As I went from one specimen to another, wondering at first if I was seeing some meaningless scratches — but what could have done what a diamond could not? — I found the strange marks repeated, although in different combinations. Here they are:



Bizarre as the thought seemed, I had to wonder if some kind of code might be involved. I deliberately put aside any consideration as to its possible origin and purpose. As a girl, I had been delighted with Poe's little

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

masterpiece, *The Gold Bug*, and later read every book about how British linguists and mathematicians, after getting a German Enigma Machine from the Poles, broke that enormously important code. So for a few years I dabbled myself in basic cryptography, but never got very good at it, lacking any mathematical or linguistic skills. But now I was better at any kind of research, and, unwilling to show these cryptic symbols to people better qualified, set about to break this code on my own. I think I've done so, and tomorrow, after my autopsy of the unfortunate Mrs. Alvarez, I hope to confirm my extremely remarkable conclusion to the mystery.

August 21

What I have to work with is a set of eight symbols, clearly not enough to make a 26-letter alphabet. I tore my hair out, figuratively, over that for weeks. But then I thought to query, obliquely, carefully, a mathematician I know, who explained in a simple way even I was able to comprehend, that eight symbols can be permuted in fifty-six ways. He said, "You can pick the first symbol in eight ways, right?" I nodded. "After that, you can pick the second in seven ways, so together there are exactly fifty-six different arrangements for each pair." I agreed, thinking, "Enough for two alphabets!"

But I rejoiced too soon, because the real problem goes back to Cryptography 101, which emphasizes the importance, nay, the necessity, of having many encrypted messages to work with, and I had only 19 of the tiny white squares. To be sure, I could get more in time, but I'm due for retirement in a few months, and will no longer be free to haunt the morgue at odd hours to carry out tricky dissections unobserved.

But even beyond that, not one of the little plaques has ever displayed more than six symbols.

Feeling very frustrated, I examined all of them repeatedly, trying to find a pattern of some sort, but the only clue was that limit of six, which told me nothing. Nothing, that is, until I had a hunch, that of taking into account the dates on which my specimens changed from living people to cadavers.

Not all of my nineteen came with such information; often, I was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

brought a body, maybe a floater, or just dry bones, about which nothing was known. No name, gender, or age, beyond what my knowledge of anatomy could tell me, and that was only approximate: Dead at least a week; dead for years, centuries; no way to tell for sure. But I did have five that qualified, and now Conchita Alvarez might give me one more vital confirmation.

I removed her coccyx bone, carefully dissected it, and put it on the stage of my Leitz. Without looking again at the other five, lest my decoding might be biased, I copied the vague inscriptions, finding again the same basic six, permuted in pairs, and wrote down what they told me, which was, in modern notation, 08/19/02, the date of her death, the day before yesterday.

What we have here, however unbelievable, cannot be denied; it is nothing less than the Expiration Date of each human, but inscribed by Whom or What, I cannot even speculate. Of course, I may be entirely wrong, somehow deluded, guilty of very bad cryptanalysis, and finding not what is true, but what I want to discover. My first impulse naturally is to seek confirmation from the most distinguished people in my field of anatomy, like my old friend, Professor Caroline Johnson at Harvard, but frankly I'm afraid, expecting a storm of withering ridicule. It's routine, almost mandatory, to subject any scientific results to peer review, but surely this is a unique situation.

At this point I need to remove what might seem a fatal flaw in my reasoning, which is that any truly specific, unique date obviously cannot be based on the Gregorian calendar versus all the others, but must be essentially "absolute." I have achieved that kind of sure consistency by linking all my calculations to key stellar configurations, completely independent of mere human devising. Thanks to my math pal.

My brain teems with wild, almost delirious questions. Surely, some people will insist on operations on their coccyx bones to extract the luz — luzs? luzes? What is the plural? — and learn their expiration dates. Could society allow that? And what if somebody determines out of desperation or some kind of overwhelming Free Will imperative to kill himself before his Due Date? Would that be somehow impossible, a fatally damaged body still clinging to life against all odds?

I must think long and hard about all this before taking any action....

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Notation by Joel Hoffman

My beloved Aunt Sue died suddenly, unexpectedly, on September 1. Had I found this amazing journal sooner, I might have been tempted to search her ashes for that tiny, square, glittering Life-Bone of hers, assuming — one hell of a big leap of faith — that she was not delusional. But it's obviously too late now, quite impossible, since her remains were scattered into the sea off Point Pinos in Pacific Grove, California. So now what: should I continue her investigations? I'm no pathologist, but could no doubt find a discreet and curious one. Or am I oddly relieved that her luz is lost and irretrievable? I'm a little afraid to deal with it, I concede, and can't help wondering what's inscribed on mine if it actually does exist. Like her, I'm bewildered and confused, unable to decide whether to publish her claims or not.

Well, in any case, there's no hurry. I'll wait and ponder....

IMPORTANT NOTICE TO SUBSCRIBERS ON THE MOVE

PLEASE DO NOT COUNT ON THE POST OFFICE TO FORWARD YOUR ISSUES AFTER YOU MOVE. IF YOU ARE PLANNING A CHANGE OF ADDRESS, PLEASE NOTIFY US AS FAR IN ADVANCE AS POSSIBLE, AND ALLOW SIX WEEKS FOR THE CHANGE TO BECOME EFFECTIVE. BE SURE TO GIVE US BOTH YOUR OLD AND NEW ADDRESS, INCLUDING THE ZIP CODES. PRINT CLEARLY AND, IF POSSIBLE, ATTACH AN OLD MAILING LABEL.

OR USE OUR HANDY CHANGE OF ADDRESS FORM ONLINE AT **www.fsfmag.com**

OLD ADDRESS
(attach label here if available)

Name _____
Address _____
City _____
State _____ Zip _____

NEW ADDRESS

Name _____
Address _____
City _____
State _____ Zip _____

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE,
Fantasy & Science Fiction, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FILMS

KATHI MAIO

AND A LITTLE CG SHALL LEAD THEM

I CAN REALLY relate to Frodo.

No, I've never been hunted by ring-wraiths. In fact, I've never even had to wander a long, long distance barefoot. (Heck, I don't even walk around the house barefoot.) But I do know what it's like to feel like one very small person up against a giant, unrelenting force. Okay, in my case, it's not *evil*, really. Certainly not anything on the scale of Sauron, the Dark Lord of Mordor. I'm only up against the Power of Peter Jackson and the LOTR movie-making maelstrom, a pop-culture phenomenon that has enthralled the filmgoing universe...

...except for me (and a few others who have taken cover lest a band of rabid Wargs or LOTR fans rip them limb from limb).

I have been hearing and reading nothing but glowing worship for the last year and a half, but I'm sorry — truly I am — I'm just not buying.

It's not that I lack admiration for the accomplishment of Mr. Jackson, his life-and producing/writing-partner, Fran Walsh, their co-writers, Philippa Boyens and Stephen Sinclair, their large cast, crew, and FX production team. They have all done some truly amazing work, joining computer technology and live-action filmmaking into two films that are sometimes jaw-droppingly dazzling. All in all, Jackson and his team have clearly tried to do real honor to the greatly beloved Tolkien books.

In this day and age, the temptation to have a character like the dwarf, Gimli (John Rhys-Davies) say something like "Let's go kick some Orc butt!" is very strong, indeed. (Take a look at the thoroughly modern medievalism of Brian

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale* for proof of this trend.) Jackson and his cowriters never fall prey to this idiocy. If anything, they are too faithful to Tolkien.

Yes, I know that they cut some interesting bits, as well as lots of uninteresting bits (like Tolkien's poetry), but cutting is clearly something Mr. Jackson prefers not to do, which is why his films are *so long*. The three hours of the first installment was less painful since there was a more clear-cut tale to tell, and that establishing story was less consistently harrowing, with more variation in tone. (Ah, for the comic relief of Bilbo Baggins's 111th birthday party!)

Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers is another matter altogether. One of the ways in which I know that *Two Towers* is not the "masterpiece" it is being called is that I could feel every minute that my lower extremities were asleep. (Roughly, the last hour of the movie.) To be very fair, most of the failings of *The Two Towers* come from the source material, which Jackson treats like a holy canon it is most assuredly not.

The movie version of *The Two Towers*, which is all striding and strife, with little relief and no real resolution, splits its story three ways and hits the ground running. No clip re-capping is shown, no voiceover bridge and no transitional material is offered, and characters old and new are thrown at the viewer (sometimes by the thousands) so rapidly that it can leave many viewers dazed and confused.

Argue if you must that Mr. Jackson refuses to talk down to his audience. He assumes that any viewer has seen the first movie (several times). Judging from the $860 million-plus in box office, he is probably right, in the case of a great many inhabitants of this troubled planet. He also assumes that you are a careful student of the Tolkien liturgy. And in the case of readers of this magazine, he is, again, probably correct in that assumption.

But what if you haven't seen the first installment or read any Tolkien? Tough luck, Mr. Jackson has said in interviews. The filmmaker has boldly stated that anyone who hasn't seen the first movie has no business seeing the second. (And the way he throws Tolkienian terminology and significant but not yet fleshed out characters into scenes, there seems little doubt that he feels the same way about anyone who hasn't closely read and studied every word Tolkien ever wrote.)

Now I expect that you, gentle

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

reader, are saying, "What's your point, rhymes-with-witch? Any dolt who hasn't reread Tolkien at least five times and hasn't rewatched the Platinum Extended Edition of *The Fellowship of the Ring* DVD (along with every one of the commentary tracks) doesn't deserve to live, much less go to the movies!"

I get your — and Mr. Jackson's — point. Truly, I do. I just don't happen to agree with it.

Here's one of the cornerstones of my response to cinema: Each movie has to stand on its own, to entertain and challenge and thrill on its own, without a viewer making any immediate reference to anything except, perchance, a little personal knowledge of the human heart. Needless to say, few movies meet this requirement. And prequels, sequels, and series movies tend to fail this test miserably. Still, there you are. For *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* truly to be the "masterpiece" or "great film" as it has so often been called, it would need to be comprehensible and emotionally satisfying as a completely independent feature film.

It just isn't.

The narrative is fractured and scattered, with too little character exposition and way too much smiting and general carnage.

I can hear you now, gentle reader. You are mentally chiding me that Mr. Jackson is only being (relatively) true to his text. Too bad, I say. I don't care if this is Tolkien's weakest novel in the trilogy — *A movie needs to succeed or fail on its own.*

Okay, let me appease you a bit by saying what Mr. Jackson's *The Two Towers* does well: The battle scenes are incredible. All those computer-generated Uruk-Hai really fill a screen. Another impressive bit of CG is his recreation of the Ents, especially Treebeard. (Discuss amongst yourselves: Who does Treebeard look like more: C. Aubrey Smith or George Bernard Shaw? And what current species of tree does he most resemble?)

But the most impressive achievement of the film of *The Two Towers* has got to be the character of Gollum/Sméagol. The best CG character ever filmed (to date), Gollum is also the most interesting and the most fully realized character in this movie. State-of-the-art FX combined with the voice and motion-capture movement of actor Andy Serkis help bring Tolkien's only deeply conflicted character to complete life. Multiple personality disorder? This deformed baby of a former Hobbit is a clinical case

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

study. Gollum was utterly corrupted by his many years with The One. Nonetheless, a pathetic glimmer of the loyal, moral Sméagol remains. It is this entity that Frodo tries to reach, and is forced to use as his guide to Mordor.

I like Elijah Wood. But, let's face it, his wide-eyed anxiety gets boring after a while. Likewise, I agree that Viggo Mortensen's Aragorn is one hunk of adorable super-man, even with all the grime and greasy hair. Ian McKellen, too, excels as a white wizard of great dignity and benevolence. But there is precious little complexity to their characters. Just as Christopher Lee's portentous Saruman is a perfect istari gone bad — and I mean *completely* bad.

All that clear-cut good and evil just doesn't make for a compelling movie. That's why the creepy little CG figure of Gollum is the real star of *The Two Towers*.

There are plenty of other things to kvetch about. And knowing me, you can guess what they are. The race/ethnicity aspect of LOTR is even more disquieting when it is brought to full, visual life. The slimy black Orcs are the minions of evil. The Aryan, pointy-eared Elves and steadfast Viking-like blondish Rohan represent the immortal and human face of what is good. And did you ever notice that Saruman, at the top of his minaret-like tower, looks a heck of a lot like the kind of mullah/ayatollah/bin Laden figure we've been demonizing for years? What's wrong with this picture? You will probably say "absolutely nothing," gentle reader. And you may be right. Or not.

I would have also preferred not to wait till the third movie to see a bit of interesting woman-action. Yes, I know, Tolkien didn't do much with his women either. But Mr. Jackson had two women on his writing team, so I was hoping against hope that the females in this film would do more than be commanded to go off somewhere by a male authority figure. Weepy Arwen (Liv Tyler) is told by her father to get out of town, I mean, Middle Earth. And the newly introduced Éowyn (Miranda Otto) is told by her uncle to go hide in the Helm's Deep cave, along with the rest of the whimpering women.

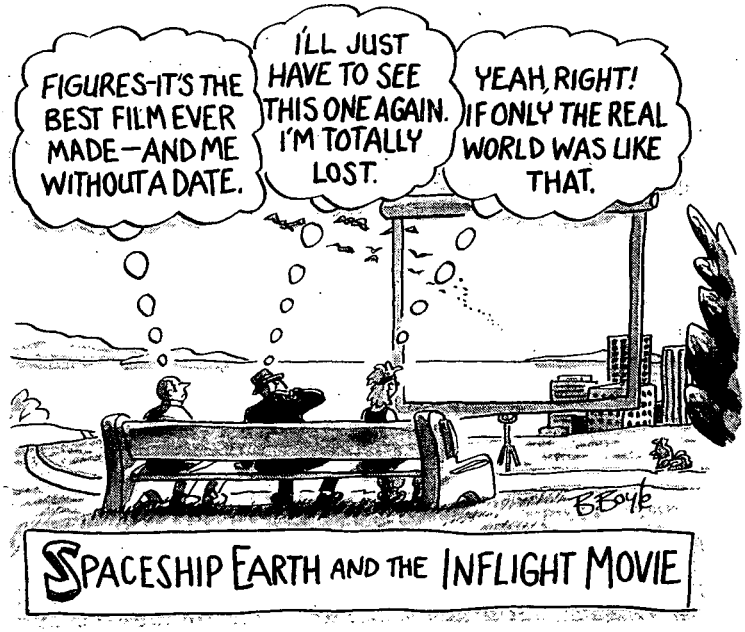
An inserted love-scene dream sequence between Arwen and Aragorn didn't appease me. Although a little bit of real sword-action featuring Éowyn, prior to her Deborah Sampson routine in Film Three, might have.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I know that Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy will probably stand as one of the great achievements in fantasy filmmaking. And I know that it will save New Line studio (for now), and make many people very, very rich.

The character of Gollum is the kind of breakthrough CG that can make a movie worth watching even if the rest of the movie it appears in is totally without merit. *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* is not that kind of movie. There is much to admire throughout the overlong course of this film. But I suspect that this is, as middle films often are, the weakest section in this three-part movie cycle.

Call it a pretty good film and I'll agree with you. Call it a great one, and I will beg to differ.


FIGURES-IT'S THE BEST FILM EVER MADE—AND ME WITHOUT A DATE.
I'LL JUST HAVE TO SEE THIS ONE AGAIN. I'M TOTALLY LOST.
YEAH, RIGHT! IF ONLY THE REAL WORLD WAS LIKE THAT.
B. Boyle
SPACESHIP EARTH AND THE INFLIGHT MOVIE

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kit Reed's second tale for us this year is a strange fantasia concerning the life of the suburban commuter. Ms. Reed herself is a longtime resident of Middletown, Connecticut, where she teaches the occasional writing course at Wesleyan University. Her many novels include Armed Camps, J. Eden, Catholic Girls, Magic Time, @Expectations, *and several thrillers written under the name Kit Craig. Her next novel,* Thinner Than Thou *is finished and publication is expected within the year.*

Incursions

By Kit Reed

LIVES GO TO PIECES INcrementally, not all at once, although it may take some of us a while to notice. Man wakes up in the middle of an empty field with his arms swinging; his heart is doing cartwheels while his head struggles to catch up. *Over,* he thinks, with the hammer behind his eyes thudding against his frontal bone: dawning terror, followed by recognition. *My life is over.*

His head jerks and hits plastic. Oh. Dream. I'm on the train. He unfolds his crumpled ticket and holds it up for the waiting conductor. Get hold of yourself, Travers. You're not crossing the Styx or anything, you're going to the city for a meeting.

But he can't stop the sound of the mallet pounding inside his skull, unless it's the thunder of his own blood: Duh. duh-duh-duh-duh. duh.

Travers clutches his Nokia and cellphones home. "I'm on the train."

The woman keyboarding next to him growls, "We know."

"Can you hear me? I'm on the train."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

There may be sound at the other end but it isn't loud enough to make out.

"Sandra? It's me, Dave. Can you hear me?" He raises his voice, in case. He really means, do you love me, but he's afraid to ask.

Around Travers, the regulars reading newspapers or tap-tapping on notebooks and PDAs frown and clear their throats. The passenger shouting into his cellphone is disrupting the flow. They all have their habits and know each other on sight. They are easy here because they do this every day; they muse or work or sleep on the train and time disappears, whereas Travers is new and every second has an edge. He doesn't *do* like they do, he is uncoordinated and gauche; he's talking too loud. He should learn to keep his head down and his elbows close to his sides.

It isn't Dave's fault; he doesn't know. Dave Travers isn't your ordinary commuter. In fact, he hasn't been to the city since he took Sandra to the World Trade Center on their anniversary, the year before the fall. He doesn't fit in with the regulars on this morning milk run; he isn't a broker or a banker or a lawyer who chose to commute so the kids could grow up in a town with grass, he's a junior college professor doing everything within his power to bring himself up in the world. He's only teaching college because his folks said he was too smart to work at Kmart and he can't think of anything else to do.

He's never wanted to teach. He doesn't like it and he hates his middle-aged night-schoolers with their moist, uncomprehending stares. He hates not being any better than he is. It's not as though he ever will be, either, except in one respect. Unlike most people, he knows it. Still there are changes he can make.

He has a meeting in New York today, a travel agency interviewing possible on-site people they can post to Mexican Hat to lead their Monument Valley tours, tailor-made for a guy who is sick of his life. At least that's what Travers tells himself. He does, after all, know a little something about the West, having read about it for years. What's it really like in Mexican Hat? Would Sandra like it there? He doesn't know. All he knows is that they both need a change.

"Sandra?" He's calling her all the way from this train, roaming charges and all that implies, and so far she hasn't even said hello. "I know you're there, Sandra, can you hear me!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Around him the regulars look up, annoyed.

He just can't go on the way he is. He taps the phone and says, louder: "Can you hear me?"

Six passengers chorus, "If we can hear you, they can hear you."

"Oh, Sandra." He presses his open mouth to the Nokia as though he can inhale her response and save it to examine later.

The phone is dead empty.

He says anyway, "I'm on the train."

If that's all he is, why won't the mallet stop thumping behind his frontal bone?

I'm only on the train, going to the city. Then why does it feel like a trip to the end of the world?

Then Travers thinks, What if I just got off at Greens Farms and ran away? Sandra wouldn't miss me, I don't think, and I know the students wouldn't. I could cut out for the high country and start over in some new place where nobody knows.

What, he wonders. His life is so dull and so simple that there aren't very many things about it. What have I got that I don't want anybody to know?

He taps the Nokia. "It's me. I'm on the train." He is still trying to reach Sandra even though they don't like each other very much. The unspoken part of the message is, Aren't you glad?

It doesn't matter what he says to the bright plastic instrument. It won't matter what the woman on the other end is saying, if indeed she is saying anything. The phone is just as dead.

This is more or less how Dave Travers finds himself getting off Metro North somewhere outside Greens Farms, Connecticut, and disappearing from the face of the Earth. He isn't there yet, but he will be soon.

Greens Farms is one of those station stops that annoys New York-New Haven/New Haven-New York commuters because it is just one more delay on a trip that already has too many stops. To Metro-North longtimers anxious to get where they are going, it's a place there's no point in stopping; nobody gets on and nobody gets off at Greens Farms because as far as they know, there's nothing there. Coming out after a hard day in the city, Greens Farms is the definition of eternity. All this time on the train and we're only at Greens Farms. At the Greens Farms stop most travelers raise their newspapers and refuse to look out the window — even

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Travers, the few times he's been this way. To look is to acknowledge the length of the trip and the size of the chunk it is gnawing out of their lives. Like the regulars, Travers has never read or heard anything about Greens Farms and he's certainly never been there, which as much as anything explains why he has drawn a picture of it in his head.

Even the conductor sounds weary as he reports that they are approaching Greens Farms. Again.

In his head Travers sees the field where he whirled in the long dream he was having before the conductor woke him. It was so green! Scary, but he'd like to get back to that place. There he was free, dislocated as he was. Startled, he jumps to attention. It's as though some great voice out there has just invited him to jump off the edge of the world.

That might not be such a bad idea.

"Did I say that?"

He doesn't know. Around him, passengers glare; why is the idiot shouting when he's holstered his phone?

It's important to pretend that wasn't him they heard, or that he wasn't really yelling. Travers spreads both his hands with a foolish grin. Look folks, you've got me wrong, it was somebody else. To confuse them Travers hums: *Show me how to get out of this world 'cause that's where everything is.*

He isn't depressed, exactly, just interested in voids and what it would be like to be suspended in one — no demands, no expectations, no humiliations — just the restful dark and silence that should come with the long-awaited and by no means certain-to-show-up-for-the-concert personal appearance of the last big thing, the cataclysm guaranteed to get top billing in this circus, the End of the World.

Something happens outside Rowayton and all the train doors pop open. Travers feels his heart hit a bump and soar like a racer bouncing into a crash. The doors to the car are open for only a moment but he sees his opportunity. For all he knows, everything lies beyond. Abandoning his briefcase, he gets up and slips out. He hits hard, rolling in the gravel as he lands. He doesn't remember which station was last or what's next but he imagines this must be Greens Farms.

He sits up, gasping. He won't remember running across the tracks or scuttling under a fence and taking off with his arms flapping and his breath

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

coming fast. He has to come to a stop before he can come to his senses at all. By the time his breathing and his heart rate return to normal, Travers is in the middle of a late-summer field flanked by thick and smelly Ailanthus, the rank, ambiguous growth that is neither weed nor tree. The deep grass in the field where Travers is standing sways in the breeze coming up from water he cannot see. The late summer sun is bright but the air is cool and sharp, hinting at fall. It isn't perfect but in his present frame of mind, it'll do. If Travers can't reach the edge of the world from here, he can certainly go someplace he's never been. If he likes it, he thinks with his heart lifting, he'll never go back. Nobody who smells escape wants to go back to being what he was.

Now, he thinks for no reason in particular. He never really intended to disappear, but now he has a chance.

Yep. Now. All I have to do is find the road. If I keep walking I can walk out of Greens Farms and out of Connecticut and out of my life in New Haven, where I was doing okay but not well. Tomorrow I can wake up in some new big town or small city and start fresh. You read about this kind of thing all the time. Man disappears and years later they find him, upstanding pillar of some new community and surrounded by a fresh batch of loved ones, happy and prosperous, maybe even successful, as somebody else. Amnesia, he can tell the people who catch up with him, unless he is hunted for some crime, in which case he says, witness protection. Listen, he could develop amnesia at any time. When you get right down to it, who's to know? Travers sees himself idealized in a Realtor's photo, a happy homeowner in a neat shirt and a tiny mustache, standing with his nice new family in front of his shiny black car, showing off his high-ticket nouveau-Colonial house.

It would solve a lot of problems, he thinks.

The field seems to stretch in all directions without boundaries. It's harder going than he thought. Once he starts moving the sawgrass whips his trousers and the ground is uneven and spongy under his feet. He walks for longer than seems right for a guy who wants simply to get to the nearest road so he can hitch a ride to some more exciting place.

At the moment the field seems endless. Travers has read enough French writers to think: I suppose this is symbolic. Existential whatever. It's probably about where I am in life.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But it isn't. He is really standing in a field, but where? In fact, he isn't much of anywhere, but he has no way of knowing. To the east there's a shape that may turn out to be a house. If it is a house and he goes inside, will he find a trap door in the living room and stairs leading to an underground universe, like the one in the computer game he used to play? No. This kind of experience doesn't play itself out like *Zork* or any other interactive game, although *Zork* is the perfect model for what's happening here. At the moment there is just Dave Travers, truly alone for the first time since he can remember, alone and standing in a field.

He doesn't know it but the geography isn't the only thing that eludes him. He's going to sit down to rest in a minute and when he gets up he'll know where he is. He will be less certain *when* it is. More: he won't know who he is.

Strangely, even though he forgets who he is, Travers will remember *Zork*, the text-based computer game he played obsessively the summer when he was twelve.

Zork1: The Great Underground Empire
West of House
You are standing in an open field west of a white house, with a boarded front door.
There is a small mailbox here.

YOU WERE STANDING in the field but even there at the beginning with only three lines on your screen, you had options; you could open the mailbox and hope there was some usable scrap of information on the note inside (there wasn't) or you could go west toward the woods and mountains or you could go east and try to get into the house. Each time you made a choice you were presented with a new set of decisions, and it is this that Travers used to love — the sense of infinitely unfolding options and the knowledge that he could thwart the roving thief and bring back treasures if only he chose the right ones.

Everything rushes out of him in a sigh. He knows that so far, at least up to the moment when the train stopped, all his choices have been wrong. Why else would the details of his life slip away from him?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When he gets to his feet again he is still standing in a field, but it has changed. There is a mailbox here, and to the east he definitely sees a white house. From here he can see the front door is boarded up but he knows he will find a window open if he walks around the house. He is standing in a field, but who he is in the game and what he's doing here eludes him. *Kind of like life*, he thinks, although he has no idea what his life is supposed to be like right now. *I wonder what I'm supposed to do next.*

Travers already knows there's nothing substantive in the note in the mailbox so he turns, wondering exactly how many moves he has coming before the inevitable thief pounces and takes everything, which he's programmed to do when a player collects one too many treasures. When Travers reaches the house the windows are boarded up too, as in *Zork*, but he understands this is nothing like *Zork*. The back door stands open and even though it's nowhere near time for the thief to show up, there are people inside.

In the kitchen, three men sit around the table. He hears other men mumbling upstairs and men moving around in the living room. Travers should be afraid but he isn't, probably because they are well dressed and obviously middle class and in this light they look sweetly bemused.

He says the first thing he can think of: "I'm new around here." He's afraid to ask *where are we*? so he says, "Who are you?"

The first stands with a polite smile. "Dave Isham."

"Dave Caverness," the second says pleasantly.

"Dave Blount." The third of them says, "And who are you?"

Here it comes: the astonishment. "I don't know." Travers thinks for a minute. "Dave," he says. He doesn't want to remember, but he does. "Dave Travers."

Dave Blount grins. "Just goes to show, the nicest guys are always named Dave."

"Or the biggest losers." Dave Winters wanders in from the living room where there are other men on sofas and kicked back in Barcaloungers, muttering pleasantly over beers. "Welcome to the Island of Lost Boys."

Dave Isham says, "Don't scare him."

"Kidding!"

"Is that where I am?" Travers means, is that what I am? Lost?

Dave Blount shrugs. "Give or take. One way or another we're all

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

taking a time out. You go along and you go along and then one day you just get sick of it, you know?"

The shrug ripples through the room like a wave. In another minute the others will begin to tell their stories and since he has lost any sense of what his story might be, Travers doesn't really want to be expected to pay back in kind. "Who pays the rent, and how?"

"It comes from somewhere," Dave Winters says.

Intent on making him feel welcome, Blount says, "We all kick in, but don't worry. It doesn't amount to much."

Travers pats his pockets. Wallet in place. He can't remember where he was going on the train but he remembers the train now. He remembers that in spite of Sandra's protests that he was cutting into the paycheck he banked to cover their monthly expenses, he took an extra hundred dollars to spend. Okay, he remembers Sandra too. He remembers trying to talk to her and he remembers hearing her breathing into the phone. He asks, "Where does the money come from?"

One of the Daves says, "Odd jobs. We come and go as we like here and feed the kitty with money we pick up doing odd jobs."

So this is not like *Zork*, he understands, there is no trap door under the rug in the living room and no trophy case for storing captured treasures because there aren't going to be any treasures. There is no rich subterranean chamber waiting at the bottom of the stairs and there may not even be any stairs leading down. This isn't a game, it's a mundane setting, in which...what? The wild hubbies hide out? The Daves sitting in the kitchen and in the living room and the Daves collecting in the doorway are all smiling pleasantly; they seem happy enough, but when the doors popped open and Travers skipped the train — okay, he remembers skipping the train — he expected something more or better to come from his escape. This is too much like a kids' clubhouse, snug but shabby and overcrowded. Squinting, Travers tries to make it make sense. "I don't get it. This is a real place and I'm really in it?"

"Pretty much."

That shrug again. Dave Blount repeats, "Give or take. Listen, Dave, we're all on the run from something, one way and another. This works for us and if you like it, you're welcome to join us here."

"I don't know."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You don't have to like it," Dave Winters says.

"Don't worry." Dave Blount will not stop smiling. "We'll do everything we can to make it pleasant for you here."

Travers looks around warily. "This isn't one of those places where when you try to leave they won't let you, is it?"

The Daves shake their heads.

"Certainly not."

"No way."

"We're easy here."

"It's *sauve qui peut*," Dave Isham says with a look that tells Travers he isn't exactly sure what that means. "We were just about to eat. Grab a bowl and pull up a chair."

"Mi casa su casa."

"Thanks."

The chairs are comfortable. The soup they serve him is good. As if Travers has asked, they take turns explaining what they're doing here. In its own way the talk that surrounds him is as empty as the field he woke up in. The various Daves all got sick of their lives one day in different ways for various reasons but all more or less at the age Travers is now, which is thirty-five. One way or another they all woke up one morning to the sameold sameold and simply maxed out, but all on a different lover or a different line of work or a different family situation in a completely different place from all the others, although the stories seem interchangeable. Each presents the circumstances as brand new. Each of them knows there are a million stories like the one he tells and every one of them insists that his story is different. This is what every man honestly believes. The Daves all got sick of their lives and started looking for ways out: the faked death so the survivors would get the insurance money to see them through; the explained runaway, with farewell note (DON'T LOOK FOR ME) pinned to the pillow or neatly folded on the kitchen table; the simple disappearance, although with fingerprints on file online and Missing Persons divisions in abundance, no disappearance is simple. Escaping the sameold sameold, the Daves all seem the same.

How long have they been here? The answers vary. How long are they going to stay and what do they want to do next? No one can say.

"We're cool," Dave Isham says, "who wants to do anything next?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Travers feels his head jerk. Was he nodding off or did something sneak up behind him and smack him with a rolled-up newspaper? He isn't sure. He stands abruptly. "I can't be here."

"Where are you going?"

"Out."

"What are you going to do?"

Too soon to tell. "I need to think." He sticks his head back in the door and tells the polite lie. "Back soon."

"Take your time," Dave Blount says genially.

Somebody else calls after him, "It's the one thing we've got plenty of."

The surrounding field is even emptier than before. It is like surfacing in a vacuum. When Travers skims the horizon looking for landmarks to ground himself, the banked Ailanthus look dauntingly the same. No tree stands out from any other tree. If he doesn't start walking, he'll never find the road out of here, but he's reluctant to push off. If he turns his back on the house and starts walking he may never find it again. The changing light is so gradual that he is surprised to see that it's getting dark. When he looks back, there is smoke curling enchantingly out of the chimney and there are lights glowing in every window, although he remembers them as boarded up. It makes him think of long walks after supper on December nights in New London. When he was old enough to go out alone he used to leave the house as soon as it got dark and roam the neighborhood, waiting for lights to pop on in other people's windows. He knows now that he was window-shopping for other lives, checking out the displays in his neighbors' brightly lighted houses as though what he saw could be his, any time he was willing to pay the price. Did he want to live here, where a high school boy sits over his computer in his very own room or over there, where a couple with a flock of children bend their heads over Grace before meals at the kitchen table or does he want to be like this old, old man in the orange stucco and live in silence in a place where nobody comes?

He needs to get moving but nostalgia hobbles him. The lives he used to spy on fuse with the life he thinks he and Sandra were living, bending their heads over nuked chicken dinners on the few nights when they ate together, slouching together on the sofa to watch TV while they emptied the identical foil trays, down to the bake-in-place apple cobbler. Sweet, he thinks. From the outside other people's lives usually look sweet.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Okay, time to decide. Travers has three choices here. He can go back into the house and settle down with the Daves for as long as it takes. He can look for the road and head out into a more productive disappearance or he can do what he already knows he has to do — head back for the tracks — that way, he thinks. The morning train is long gone but if he can find the tracks he can get another train. Head for the tracks and follow them to the next station where, he thinks, his ticket is probably still good. After all, he bought a fare from New Haven to New York and didn't get the good of it because he jumped off somewhere around halfway. Worst case scenario, he can forget about the city and use his return ticket. He checks. Yep, he's still holding his return.

Okay. Right. Time to pull up his socks and go back. He thinks: I owe it to my boss and my students, even though none of them ever gets anything above a C. I owe it to Sandra. After all, he thinks, not necessarily correctly, Sandra needs me. Get home, he thinks, walk in and she'll be so glad to see me that everything will be better for us. He should call ahead, but his phone isn't necessarily working and he doesn't want to find out for sure. Besides, he wants it to be a surprise. Things will change if she was really worried and she's really glad to see him.

If this field really was like the field in *Zork*, Dave's return would involve a measured number of trials and errors, ordeals and decisions, but it isn't. If this disconnected state Travers is in was in fact an ordinary crisis, his decision to go back would certainly resolve it. All this would turn out to be one of those dreams that evaporates as soon as the sleeper wakes up.

Travers would wake up on the same train he was riding this morning, surrounded by the same passengers and sitting next to the woman keyboarding with the morning paper folded on his lap and his briefcase at his feet and he would wake up with no actual time elapsed. Waking, he'd discover that although it's almost night here in the field where he is standing, on the train he was riding to the city, it is still ten A.M., seconds before he jumped.

There's also the possibility that he fell out: some kind of seizure — an attack of *petit mal* or a sugar crash that knocked him flat. In that case Travers will come to on the rattling metal floor just over the car's rear wheels, surrounded by horrified commuters who don't know what to do

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

because he's choking on his tongue. *Step back*, one of the passengers will say, brandishing a pencil for him to clench between his teeth. *I'm a doctor.* Worst case scenario is a heart attack, unless it is the best: Travers returning to consciousness in an emergency room in Stamford or Bridgeport because much as the white light beckoned, at the last minute he lost heart and ran away from it. He hopes it doesn't spin out that way because he knows that people who almost die and come back from the white light spend the rest of their lives in perpetual mourning. They felt so calm, they say with that catch in the breath that masks a bereaved sob.

It was so peaceful there that they will never be happy again.

Travers should be so lucky. As it turns out, once he starts walking away from the house, he has to walk for hours. With no Sun to steer by and no sliver of Moon to light his way, he has no idea whether he's going east, toward the water and the tracks, or whether in fact he has circled in the dark and is accidentally heading for the mountains in the west where — if this could only be *Zork*! — where he'd go through the mountain pass and broach the gorge to find the miserable dam and, with any luck, the lost Atlantis which reveals itself when a player pushes the right buttons and the river drains. When he looks back in hopes of sighting his only landmark, Travers can no longer see the lights of the house glowing behind him. He thinks the breeze is a little damper and he catches a hint of salt on his tongue, so there is a chance he's really going toward Long Island Sound and the tracks.

Then a string of lights streaks along just above the horizon: the train, he thinks, lucky people staring at nothing out of all those lighted windows. It's so late here that he has no way of knowing whether it is his train. Probably not. It would appear that this journey is not the product of a temporary fainting fit and he isn't dreaming, either. His train is long gone. It really is night and it's getting late. After midnight the Metro-North schedule thins to a trickle. Few trains go by at this hour, so he has to wait. There is the additional problem of getting any train to stop for him.

When a train does come its lights pick up Travers standing in the middle of the tracks with his white face glowing like a surrender flag. He wigwags his arms wildly, trying to get the engineer's attention, but the thing comes roaring down on him anyway. For a second he wavers,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

considering. It is an opportunity, and it is tempting. He jumps out of the way, but only at the last minute. When you decide to get back on the train you don't give in and get trashed by one.

He shrugs. Sighing, he starts walking along the tracks.

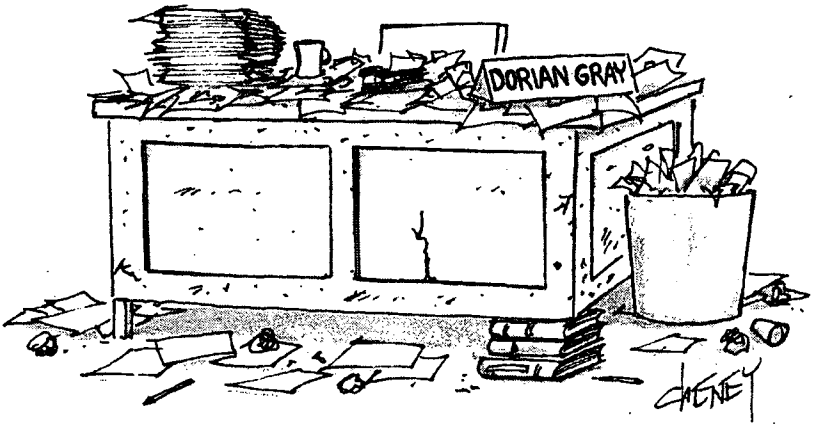
It is a long night.

The landscape is barren and the tracks seem endless. Even in gathering daylight the engineers won't stop for him. The stations, if there are stations where he is heading, must be closed for the night. Eventually, he supposes, he'll come to at least one crossing where the tracks intersect a major road instead of taking the bridge over it or disappearing into yet another underpass. Then he can take the road and hope drivers are better at the Samaritan thing than the night engineers on Metro-North. Hopeful, he looks ahead, but as far as he can tell, it's unbroken track all the way down the line.

Come on, he thinks. *I can't go on this way*. As it turns out, he can. He walks for another hour and except for detritus stirred up by the breeze from passing trains, nothing changes. It's getting tired out. He's hungry now.

Defeated, he taps his phone. "Sandra? It's me. I'm on the train."

He's not but it won't matter. Either his battery's dead or the nearest relay tower is so far out of range that she won't hear him.



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In these times When Trilogies Rule the Earth, John Morressy has kindly done us the favor of synopsizing volume one. Once you finish these seven pages, you'll be able to fake your way through any cocktail party conversation or editorial meeting. Just remember to smile and nod a lot.

The Curse of the Von Krumpelsteins and Other Horrors: Contents of Volume I

By John Morressy

CHAPTER ONE: IN WHICH our hero, with his ragtag band of outcasts, misfits, undesirables, bums, and loafers, sets out on the quest for the Magic Thing, despite the chilling prophecy of the Flat Man. A cloaked figure is seen on the road to Castle Krumpelstein, bearing what appears to be a large lump of tofu. The meeting between Mme. Brissard and the infamous Contessa Di Pravity ends in tragedy following an interminable discussion of free will. Norman reveals the truth about the missing biscuits. A brief history of the chin, with suggestions for its use.

Chapter Two: In which a mysterious stranger arrives in Doyle's Furnace, Ohio, and reveals the six secrets of instant hair loss. Ricardo and his sister outwit the Slattery twins, save the orphanage, and get Mrs. Zapinski to the Sorcerer's Institute just in time for George's transformation. Inside tips on forging Uncle Harry's signature, building a handy low-cost particle accelerator, investing in successful children, and turning that dank root cellar into useful attic space, all for under ten dollars or the amount on Line 44a, whichever is less.

Copyright © 2003 by John Morressy. All rights reserved.
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Chapter Three: In which Sherman Tank, former Agent C21 of SLUSH, is recalled to service when a TX2D-71B/3(a) manned by renegade acronymists penetrates BAMNORDOPSIMFAT security and threatens the meeting of WESNADSUBLIFDIPCOM ministers at CAPCOMSAC HQ, bringing the world to the brink of tears. The little lost kitten is found under Mrs. Tureen's porch. Mafouz delights the sultan with tales of The Magic Eraser and wins freedom for himself and Selima, fairest flower of Zonguldak (Pop. 36,874) in time for this once-in-a-lifetime vacation in the Islets of Langerhans, with suggestions on what to pack and whom to leave behind. The twelve Murphys return to life, having lost all interest in the ukulele. A simple five-minute quiz will help you determine which of your neighbors are dangerous sociopaths and which are harmless loonies.

Chapter Four: In which our hero is born, thanks to a generous grant from the Ringling Brothers' Foundation. Scenes from his early life, including the adventure of the seventh teddy bear, the enigma of the laughing uncle, and the story of Eleanor the purple crayon lady. Pjmq, Grand Wooxxo of Glippiland, disappears on the third day of the Festival of Tiny Plastic Spoons, and the Soft People are suspected of plotting mischief. After a pursuit spanning three continents, D. D. "Spats" Larsen is rendered helpless by Anita de Groin, Special Operative of the Women's Defense League. Timmy and Tommy go undercover and stay there, to everyone's relief.

Chapter Five: In which Teddy begins school, unaware that he alone holds the key to the secret of the Whistling Futon, and that the Wet Men are already on his trail. In a carefully planned move, Edna reveals the Nine Laws of Spontaneity. Desmond confronts the problem of those unsightly yellow patches on the lawn while our hero prepares a delicious meal for twelve for under two hundred dollars, including wine and all gratuities. All major credit cards are accepted and quickly earn the respect of their neighbors.

Chapter Six: In which Kate recounts the legend of the Gumbley girls and their magic hair dryer and reveals the Sevenfold Way of Flossing. An excerpt from Chapter LXXVI of *High Wind in the Gabardines*, a thrilling tale of adventure, romance, and gastric discomfort aboard a British cruise ship in the Napoleonic era, with a colorful insert map showing all duty-free ports. With the help of the pookah, Irma discovers the missing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

biscuits and clears Norman from suspicion, to the chagrin of Larsen's henchmen. Jean-Pierre delivers a lengthy paper on the nature of reality before leaving to inform Prince Wolfgang of his bootmaker's treachery. Maude arrives at the State School for the Plain, where she wins the coveted award for Most Astonishing Potholder.

Chapter Seven: In which little Grumbeletta encounters Prince Wolfgang and dances the dance of the disoriented milkmaids. He is enchanted by her grace and beauty, but when his comrades taunt him about chasing milkmaids, he rides into the forest, laughing callously. Little Grumbeletta does an exhausting series of *fouettes* and expires. The *Omadhaun of Space* escapes the neutron storm, dodges an unfriendly asteroid, and lands safely on Witherworld, where the entire crew cheerfully undergoes a sex change. Off the Irish coast, Harry and Oliver confront the Spanish fleet in the climactic battle of the war. On the French coast, the light gleams and is gone. So is Walter.

Chapter Eight: In which our hero meets his match and is not impressed. Little Grumbeletta appears to Prince Wolfgang in a dream, accompanied by the spirits of angry shepherdesses who suffer severe lower back pain from attempting to do the dance of the disoriented milkmaids without proper training. Terence subjects them to a long analysis of the bond market. The school bully kidnaps the faculty on the eve of Open School Day and demands as ransom twelve useful tips on window treatments. A mysterious telegram arrives. Little Tim loses it, but it is recovered with the aid of Mitzi Pizzicato, plucky second violinist of the Histrionic Philharmonic. A thing of beauty is a joy for thirty days, with no obligation to purchase. Lamont reveals his true identity to Paula, who then reveals her true identity to Morton, who has no true identity and complains bitterly to Edna, who runs off with Walter, who has just returned.

Chapter Nine: In which the Nose Fiend of Dusseldorf is brought to bay by Inspector Flimme of the Sureté after a breathless chase through the sewers of Paris and a deadly game of Hide-the-Monkey in the upper levels of the Eiffel Tower. Jane returns home after an eleven years' absence to find the dishes, and Michael, lying unwashed in the sink. The spirit of a pharmacist appears to Betty and Bobby and reveals the way to the enchanted car wash. They find themselves in the Kingdom of the Fubbies,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

where they learn the importance of brewer's yeast in a healthy diet, and little else. Morton discovers his true identity and puts it back untouched.

Chapter Ten: In which Belle Bottom, sweetheart of the fleet, rejects the advances of Ensign Benson and enters a nunnery, where she records a hit single. Pjmq reappears. About to reveal the reason for his disappearance, he disappears before he can speak. Unable to sleep, hunt, or button his doublet, Prince Wolfgang slips from his castle disguised as a portmanteau and makes his way to America, concealing in his lining the family recipe for low-calorie tofu Black Forest cake, known as the Curse of the Von Krumpelsteins. With the aid of their Swiss Army toothpick, Pierce and Lance overcome their guards and escape from the alien spaceship with convincing proof of Fermat's last theorem. The Hardy Boys meet the Gibson Girls. Together they organize a musical to raise funds for the new gym. Jim absconds with the funds and three of the Gibson Girls, but they get no farther than Doyle's Furnace, Ohio, before there is a falling out in which Nellie Gibson sprains her wrist. As a result, her sisters marry identical twins named Donald.

Chapter Eleven: In which beautiful Magda Spilova, penniless but proud, arrives at Ellis Island on a cold February morning in 1903 to begin a saga of four generations of tiresome people, a tale of greed, wealth, and *haute couture* soon to be an endless mini-series. Jim comes out of the closet to watch. Ernestine goes in, turning the cramped, gloomy space into a cheerful mother-in-law apartment for under ninety-nine dollars (utilities and mother-in-law not included). Tragically mistaking Custer's last stand for Fermat's last theorem, Pierce is lanced and Lance is pierced. Jean shares her ten exciting uses for sun-dried sherbet and an examination of its role in gaining, losing, and lifting weight. Maude, now an internationally famous designer of celebrity potholders, gives it all up to become a medical missionary to the golfers of Palm Springs.

Chapter Twelve: In which Cleophase Wohoon, pampered darling of the Old Confederacy, rejects the honorable love of Dewey Lee and dedicates her life to fainting. Cindi and Luke capture a serial jaywalker and despite the obstructionist plotting of the McGrungy brothers, discover the true purpose of Steve. Larry Church and Tom Perdue uncover startling new information about Marcel Proust's addiction to cross-country tea dunking.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Chapter Thirteen: In which a mysterious aloe plant appears in Doyle's Furnace, Ohio, and passes itself off as three of the Slattery twins. Startling revelations about the people down the street and their inner tube collection. Unknown to our hero, Prince Wolfgang returns to the pencil factory and makes a series of long-distance calls to European tofu suppliers. Under interrogation, Colonel Asaki confesses to freeloading.

Chapter Fourteen: In which the curse of the Von Krumpelsteins is accidentally unleashed by Ramjet Singh and turns out to be a blessing in disguise as Aunt Martha. The genuine will is found in Uncle Harry's trunk, along with the missing aerialist's costume. Magda rejects the advances of Prince Wolfgang. Possible origins of the unpleasant odor in Lord Henry's orangery are examined and immediately discarded. The art show is a smashing success; Floyd wins the scholarship, but turns it down in order to marry Hester, who loves Florian. But Florian loves Lorraine, who loves this easy recipe for a delicious fudge cake that you can make in just three minutes with nothing but salt, flour, and loss of appetite.

Chapter Fifteen: In which Desirée and Arnold are reunited and discover the secret of true love, which they will make available to readers who send in a stamped, self-addressed envelope crammed with used twenties. Various Murphys marry, emigrate to Australia, dye their hair, appear on afternoon television to discuss their intimate problems with strangers, go mad, run for local office, and study the techniques of successful cartooning. Pjmq reappears once again; he is demoted to Assistant Wooxxo and as he is being given a severe warning against further disappearances, disappears. Dennis loses his memory, but Alastair finds it before his mother returns with the disgusting Mister Turlopp, and the evening is an unexpected success. Gifford faints upon hearing the name of his new neighbor. Despite Marshal Logan's order, the boys from the Circle B ride into Tombstone and find the Slattery twins waiting. To everyone's astonishment, Mr. Lummison decides to paint his garage.

Chapter Sixteen: In which, despite a crick in his neck, a flea in his ear, a lump in his throat, and butterflies in his stomach, our hero confronts a dog in the manger, a pig in a blanket, a bird in the hand, a fly in the ointment, a bat in the belfry, the head of a pin, a hair of the dog, the eye of a needle, a nose for news, the teeth of the storm, a chest of drawers, the heart of the matter, the arm of the law, the hand of fate, a leg of the journey,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the shank of the evening, the foot of the bed, the butt of the joke, a knock at the door, the voice of the people, the song of the lark, the top of the morning, the middle of the road, the side of the angels, the back of me hand, the bottom of the barrel, a piece of the action, a night at the opera, a day at the races, a weekend in the country, the height of the ridiculous, the depth of despair, a wall of silence, a table of contents, the chair of the committee, a bed of roses, a window of opportunity, a bag of tricks, a box on the ear, a train of thought, the ship of state, the man of the hour, the news of the day, the book of the month, the woman of the year, the crime of the century, Jack in the pulpit and Johnny on the Spot. He girds his loins, squares his shoulders, and with a smile on his lips, a glint in his eye, his feet on the ground, his head in the clouds, his back to the wall, a song in his heart and a spring in his step, puts his nose to the grindstone and lets George do it.

Chapter Seventeen: In which the wicked are punished and the good rewarded, not without many complaints in triplicate on Form 664D/2 filed at this office no later than closing time on August 31. Rain falls on the parched soil, the snows of winter melt, the song of the lark is heard in the land, and rivers run to the sea, causing floods in low-lying areas and dense early morning fog along the Interstate. In a stirring speech from the gallows, Gaspard reveals the simple phrase that will unlock your hidden psychic powers, avoid costly furnace repairs, and end unsightly mustache droop. Heroes come marching home to a grateful nation. Missing heirs and wealthy uncles turn up unexpectedly at the crucial hour. Lovers are united. Enemies are reconciled. Neighbors drop in for coffee and delicious cinnamon buns made from Claudia's secret recipe. The Curse of the Von Krumpelsteins is lifted at last, revealing twelve exciting window treatments missing since Open School Day. Children are reconciled to weeping parents who had hoped to be rid of them. Drab living rooms are redecorated at a cost to fit every budget. The Magic Thing is returned to its rightful home, humans and gnomes join hands in friendship, and the Tooth Fairy is crowned. Sinners repent, criminals confess, poor posture is corrected, ancient wrongs are righted, lost reputations are restored, and leaking roofs are repaired. Healthful low-calorie tofu Black Forest cake is now available to all, thanks to a miraculous new form of cookware developed for use on uninhabitable planets. Ships survive the storm and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

come safely into port; Albert's teeth are whiter than ever; airliners land with a spunky flight attendant at the controls; trains pull into the station amid cheering crowds, the *Omadhaun of Space* returns to Earth packed with tasteful gifts for the waiting crowds, the roses bloom once more in Mrs. Humbleton's garden, and storm windows open at the touch of a finger, making them easier to clean than Uncle Henry. Rex escapes from the pound and arrives at Timothy's bedside, restoring the child's will to whine.

Yet significant questions remain unanswered. Will our hero accept the challenge of Glenda of the Three Thumbs and join the quest for the Other Magic Thing, or will he finish school, marry Ida, and manage the family convenience store? Is Ralph really Sir Charles's long-lost grandmother? Can Emily ever forgive Rudolph's indiscretion with the gladioli? Will Tiffany and Dawn make the cheerleader squad? And what about Eugene and the thumbtacks? Can the little food processor survive the onslaught of the nutmegs? Will they love you in June as they do in May? Is commercial real estate the investment opportunity of the decade? Does it really suit your active lifestyle? How did the murderer escape from the locked billiard room of the Slumbottom mansion *six years before the crime was committed*? Are you getting enough fiber, exercise, attention, and quality time with your budgies? Will Jack and Reggie lead the relief column to the lost oasis of Sidi-el-Shabbi in time to save Raul and Abdul? Will old Ad Burful's rainmaking machine save the crops? Is there intelligent life downtown? Should you see your doctor, or is it only gas?

TO BE CONTINUED...

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

By the time this issue hits the stand, Harvey Jacobs's new story collection, My Rose and My Glove, *should be available for those who collect things, and even for those who don't. Mr. Jacobs's other books include the collection* The Egg of the Glak *and the novels* Beautiful Soup, American Goliath, *and* The Juror. *There was a list around here with his complete list of publications, but it seems to be missing. Perhaps Joe Luna can help...*

The Retriever

By Harvey Jacobs

AURORA PLATZ WRIGGLED her bottom against a hard leather chair shaped like a baseball mitt. The glove's pocket made a seat, its spread fingers made a back. The chair swiveled on an iron post. Aurora moved her body sideways, pivoting along the perimeter of an invisible crescent, trying to get comfortable.

The whole office had a sports motif. Autographed footballs, basketballs, baseballs, and three hockey pucks rested on top of a long cabinet filled with file folders. There were pictures of thoroughbreds crashing toward finish lines, running backs smashing into end zones, soccer players making head contact with flying balls, masked goalies deflecting slap shots, a bowler goosing air with his thumb while a triangle of pins blew apart, many glossy photos of baseball greats diving at bases, fielding impossible drives, swinging blurred bats against blurred balls. There was a poster for a Louis-Schmelling fight and a frame holding a pair of unused ringside tickets for the historic bout between Muhammad Ali and Sonny Liston.

The pinched little man who sat behind a metal desk facing her, Joe

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Luna, wore a Yankee cap and a Rams T-shirt. He rubbed his right hand over what she recognized as a nicotine patch stuck to the bubblelike bicep of his left arm, then reached the hand into his mouth and pulled out a wet wad of Nicorette chewing gum. There was an empty pack of the nicotine gum sitting in an ashtray the size of a salad bowl filled with butts. Luna rolled the spent slug of Nicorette into a soggy ball and dropped it into the disgusting ashtray. Aurora had a sudden vision of a chef gone totally insane, preparing the last meal for a condemned serial killer. She also had the feeling that she knew this Mr. Luna from someplace else. "Have we met before?" Aurora asked him.

"I doubt it. Besides, Joe Luna never forgets a blousefull."

"Pardon?"

"Cancel that remark."

Luna took a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes from a desk drawer, slid out one of the white cylinders, lit it with a lighter shaped like a woman's torso. When he flicked on its flame the torso's large breasts blinked red nipple lights. He tilted his head back, sucked in a long draught of smoke and let it out slowly.

"You ever try to quit smoking?" he asked her. "What a fucking wrestle. So, lady, what can I do for you?" Aurora noted that Luna's voice was a perfect match for his skimpy body and shrunken head, a high-pitched alto like the scream of a bird.

"A friend of mine, Sharon Durman, used your service. She gave me your card."

"Durman, Durman, Durman. It rings a bell. Oh, yes, Sharon Durman. Fat ass. Short hair. Eye twitch. What's she up to these days?"

"I think she moved to Florida," Aurora said. "I haven't heard from her in a while."

"Florida. Lucky bitch. Spring training," Luna said. "Excuse my language. It's the smoking thing."

Aurora rocked the glove-chair back and forth. She could feel Luna looking at her as if she was his cigarette lighter, waiting for her breasts to flash. She thought about getting up and walking out but reconsidered. The point of her visit was to get something done that needed doing, not to judge the doer. "I lost a pendant," she said. "Nothing expensive. A pewter cat on a silver chain. I would like it found if possible."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Sentimental value, right?" Luna said. "Your husband gave it to you, right?"

"Actually, no, my husband didn't give it to me."

"I get the picture," Luna said. He made a sucking sound.

"What picture? There is no picture to get. It was a gift from a friend." Aurora wondered why she bothered to comment.

"Okay, if you say so. A missing pussycat on a chain. Put out an all-points bulletin. Call in the Secret Service. So tell me, where when and how?"

"I feel silly enough having come here ready to pay your ridiculous fee to find a worthless trinket," Aurora said. "I don't need you to trivialize...."

"You're absolutely right," Luna said, taking another drag. "Let's cut to the chase. Where do you think you lost your pussy, when did you realize she was unaccounted for, and how do you think she escaped?"

"Escaped? The cat didn't make a conscious decision to get lost. I think the clasp on the chain snapped. It was quite old and not very well made. I first noticed the pendant was missing two days ago. Since then I've checked at my office, at the restaurant where I had dinner that night, in the lobby and elevators of my building, everywhere I could think of including my apartment. I even went through clothes where it might have snagged on a sleeve."

"What about your purse? You'd be surprised how many times the missing object ends up in her bag."

"Of course I emptied my purse."

"No cigar, heh? Did you bring something like a sketch of the item in question? I need more to go by."

"Here," Aurora said, handing Luna her primitive drawing of the pendant.

"Nice. Excellent. It's not a Picasso but I get the idea. All right. The Retriever is on the case." Luna lifted the ashtray and dumped it into his wastebasket. A puff of ashes made a little cloud that drifted toward Aurora's shoes. She stood up quickly. "On your way out please stop at my secretary's desk," Luna said. "Old Ironsides handles the money stuff. You know there's a down payment, a charge for my time and talent and a small bonus if I come up with the prize."

"No problem. Should I call you in a few days?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Absolutely not," Luna said. "I'll call you. Unless there's something going on under the table. I'm saying, I know how to keep a confidence."

"Sorry. Nothing delicate. Nothing for the *National Enquirer*. On the other hand, call after six but before seven. My husband never gets home before seven. He already thinks I'm an idiot to care about a piece of cheap costume jewelry so he might as well not know that I'm paying a small fortune to hire a bloodhound."

"A bloodhound? That's good. I like it," Luna said. "I get the message. This is between you and yours truly. As for the small fortune, it's a big city out there, a big world, a humongous galaxy. You think this is an easy job? You're asking for a grand slam, a hole in one, the Heisman Trophy, Olympic gold. Lady, you gets what you pays for."

"Well, I hope you find the silly pendant," Aurora said. "I'd planned to wear it next month for a special occasion."

"If it ain't been pulverized, atomized, or sodomized, consider it found," Luna said.

"What a disgusting man," Aurora said to herself after she wrote out a check and left The Retriever's office. "What an arrogant cockroach." She felt a strong urge to take a hot shower, to send any flecks of Joe Luna that might have stuck to her body swirling down the drain and into the sewer system. Aurora took a taxi home.

In the shower, she thought about the pendant's provenance. Chuck West had slipped it into her hand on the night of their high school prom while he groped at her in the back seat of his father's Chevrolet. Chuck was pleading for relief, begging for a chance to cross home plate. That's what they called it back then. No way, Chuckie.

Aurora dropped her bar of scented soap. *Home plate*. Maybe that's why Joe Luna's chair made her feel sweaty. She laughed with her face turned up toward the gush of water. Aurora remembered how she'd stopped Chuck cold between second and third but she did let him tongue her left breast.

Next week, at their twentieth class reunion, Aurora planned to wear that pathetic looking cat-on-a-chain and see if Chuck even remembered. It would be interesting to see what Shelly Greer looked like after all those years. Shelly was the girl he married a month after graduation. Aurora got that news while she was away at college in a letter from her mother. The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

night she got that letter she let Henry Platz spread her legs and enter her for the first time. "Lord," Aurora said out loud, "the things we do, the way things happen."

Two days later, in the early evening, Joe Luna rang the doorbell at Aurora Platz's apartment. She saw his face framed in the door's peephole, suspended like a Christmas ornament. "The doorman didn't announce you," she said, opening the door.

Luna shrugged. "So much for security," he said. "I tried to call but your phone was busy. So I took a chance you'd be home. Besides, I wanted to see your face when I handed you this." He opened a fist and there was her cat pendant.

"This is fantastic," Aurora said, reaching for the chain. "Unbelievable. Where in creation...?"

"Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies," Luna said. "Well, that's that. Nice seeing you again, Mrs. Platz. And thanks for your business."

"Thank *you* a dozen times over," Aurora said. She watched Luna retreat down the hall toward the elevator, wondering if she should at least invite him in for a cup of coffee. But the elevator was waiting when he got there. He turned, waved, and stepped quickly into the car.

A month later, Aurora decided to walk home after leaving her office in the Human Resources division of Wentor Industries. A lingering sunset, its pink and orange glow a gift of daylight-saving time, lit the winter-battered city. She could feel the coming of spring and better weather. Aurora mused fondly about her first and only infidelity. Was it really infidelity? What happened seemed more a matter of closure, natural as the change of seasons. She felt a twinge of guilt but only a twinge, vague as the vibration of the subway train rushing under the street. Nobody had been hurt; there were no scars. Aurora had been more than nice to her husband since it happened.

Chuck and Shelly West had been happy to see her at their high school reunion. Shelly showed pictures of two teenage children, a boy who looked like his father and a girl who looked like her mother. Central casting. Henry retaliated with a snapshot of Aurora on a beach in Cancun. They all got along. Later, Henry danced with Shelly while she danced with Chuck. He made a remark about her high school cheerleader's sweater. He said he was amazed that the sweater fit so perfectly, that Aurora had the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

figure of a teenager. She said she'd found it tucked away in a trunk and thought it would be a nice touch, considering, though she was worried about smelling like a mothball. Chuck said she smelled like cut grass. Then he commented on her pendant.

He remembered giving it to her. She saw his eyes well when the memory hit home. Then he asked if they could have lunch or a drink and talk about old times. Aurora said yes, that Henry would be away on a business trip next week so she'd have time on her hands.

The night they met, Aurora wore a skirt and blouse she found in the same trunk that held her old sweater. The skirt took some letting out but not much. She had her hair done in the style she'd worn at her prom. She wasn't planning to be seduced but she did wear a new bra and panties from Victoria's Secret. She and Chuck had their talk, drank a few gin martinis, and one thing led to another. He reached home plate in the back of his Lexus in a parking lot outside the school stadium. It was all very nice, very civilized, very sweet, very loving. Afterward, Chuck told her he was happy with Shelly and the kids and she told him she was happy with Henry and their life together and that was the end of their brief encounter. It was enough. When Henry came home, Aurora wore the Victoria's Secret underwear, newly washed in Woolite, for him.

Aurora's walk was interrupted by Joe Luna who came up behind her and tapped her on the shoulder. "Hey, I'm sorry if I startled you," Luna said. This time he was smoking a huge cigar, inhaling Cuban fumes. "I thought I recognized you. That's some neat shape you carry around."

"Mr. Luna," Aurora said. "I'm still amazed about the pendant."

"Hey, it's why they pay me the big bucks," Luna said. "If I may say so, you look really terrific, Mrs. Platz. Just walking down the street you could be in a ballet."

"Compliment accepted," Aurora said. "It was nice seeing you, Mr. Luna."

"Call me Joe. Oh. One more thing. This is for you, on the house." Luna handed her a small package wrapped in brown paper and carton tape. Then he turned and walked away.

Puzzled, Aurora put the package into her carry bag. She couldn't begin to imagine what Joe Luna had given her and she was in no hurry to find out. Back in the apartment, she stripped off her clothes and took a quick bath.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When Henry got home he found her naked, doing jumps, twirls and summersaults, the routine she'd learned way back when.

"Go team go," she said to him. Henry got out of his suit and had her on the living room carpet. "That was awesome," Aurora said. "Positively psychedelic."

They sent out for Chinese food and after dinner he went to work at his computer checking on their stocks and bonds. While Henry pecked at the keyboard, Aurora found the package Joe Luna pressed into her hand. She used a scissor to cut through heavy tape, then unrolled the brown paper. Inside the wrap Aurora found one of Luna's cards pasted to a matchbox. On the back of the card he'd written, "Hi, cutie. Thought you might like to have this. Luv, Joe."

She slid open the matchbox. Inside, on a cotton blanket, she saw a tiny gold hoop earring. "My God," Aurora whispered. Her husband asked her if she'd said something to him and she told him no, that she was only muttering to herself.

Aurora went to her bedroom and searched out a plastic bag where she stored all kinds of meaningful junk. She spilled the bag's contents onto her bedspread. There were medals for gymnastics, a pin that dangled a pair of miniature ice skates, old credit cards, several dead pens, cigarette lighters, colored perfume bottles, berets, lipstick tubes, coins she'd brought back from her honeymoon in Europe, a variety of memorabilia, some items so ancient that their memories had detached. She sifted through the pile and, sure enough, there was the mate for the earring Joe Luna returned.

Aurora held the reunited gold circles in a cupped hand. She sat on the bed and closed her eyes. Her mother gave her those earrings on her 15th birthday. The day before, when her father found out that she'd had her ears pierced without parental sanction, the shit hit the fan. She remembered him howling at her from a crimson face then slapping her hard on the cheek when she yelled back. Her mother also threw a fit, yelling about rushing the clock, then went upstairs with a migraine.

By the next morning tempers cooled. That afternoon, when Aurora got home from school, her mother handed her a white porcelain music box decorated with pansies. The box played "Strawberry Fields" with its lid lifted. Inside, she found the gold hoops cradled in tissue. Her mother made it clear that the gift was their little secret. It took six weeks before she

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

could wear the earrings. One of her pierced ear-holes infected so badly she had to go to a doctor. Her father seemed vindicated by the oozing wound and resigned himself to having a child with pitted lobes.

How one of those coy earrings managed to lose itself Aurora had no idea. It just did. She never mentioned that disaster to her mother and nothing was ever said about it. Now, more than twice the age she was when she got them, Aurora sat on her bed and cried over the loss. The weeping puzzled Aurora since what was lost had been found. Her husband came into the bedroom and found her sniffling. He patted her hair to comfort her and told his wife he'd noticed that she seemed to be losing weight, that she should go for her annual checkup. "That's silly, dear," Aurora said. "I'm not depressed, I feel fine. In fact, I feel better than I have in years." Then a flood of tears erupted from nowhere and Henry insisted she call Dr. Fineberg for an appointment.

The doctor confirmed that Aurora shed fourteen pounds but saw no cause for alarm since her vital signs were perfect. The one thing that bothered Dr. Fineberg was that, when he measured her, she came up nearly two inches shorter than his records indicated.

He said there was the possibility of osteoporosis, prescribed calcium pills, and suggested a bone scan in the near future, adding that there was no reason for alarm. Aurora wanted to ask him about her breasts. They seemed smaller to her but could easily be ascribed to the reduction of body fat. The whole subject was embarrassing so Aurora let it pass, agreeing to come in for a checkup in six months or sooner if her scale gave cause for concern.

When she left Dr. Fineberg's office, Aurora stopped at her favorite ice-cream parlor and ordered a hot fudge sundae with nuts and whipped cream. After that, she went shopping at a local mall until she found a paisley tie she thought Joe Luna might like. When she mailed it, along with a Thank You note for retrieving her treasured earring, she realized the tie was probably too conservative for him, that Luna would probably prefer a design showing something like a torrent of golf balls dangling under his excuse for a chin.

In the same store where she'd bought the tie Aurora got herself a LOVE ME TENDER Elvis poster that she hung over her bed. Henry got home after midnight too tired to notice the poster or anything else. He said

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he'd been trapped in a gut-grinding meeting with a vicious new client. He got into bed yawning and reached out for Aurora but she pulled away, rolled over on her stomach and whispered, "Not tonight."

Henry was asleep before she got the words out. Aurora drifted off thinking that Henry might or might not like the poster but if her father could come to terms with pierced ears her husband could learn to live with Elvis. *Henry, her husband? Her husband, Henry? Aurora Platz?* She giggled into the pillow while she slipped her hand down between her legs thinking about Elvis's smooth fingers flying like the wind over the frets of his guitar.

The next Friday, Aurora lost her job at Wentor Industries for sassing back at her boss.

Mr. Dubman had called her on the carpet for writing an evaluation of a potential employee that described the young man as *a hunk* and used the word *cute* three times in one paragraph. Dubman took the opportunity to comment on her clothing. He said she was violating Wentor's "dress code" which Aurora never knew officially existed. He pointed out her torn jeans with rolled bottoms and the *Staying Alive* T-shirt with John Travolta's picture. He said Wentor Industries was not a disco.

Dubman was so acerbic and obnoxious Aurora screamed that he was a sexist pig. She got two weeks vacation pay and two weeks severance after signing a paper that absolved the company of any wrongdoing, packed her personal belongings and left the office behind. The day got worse. When Aurora reached home she couldn't find her collection of LPs. She called Henry who was in the middle of a conference. He said they'd agreed to give the stack of vinyl to the Salvation Army years ago, then disconnected her call.

Insulted by her boss and infuriated by Henry Platz, Aurora went to comfort herself with an ice-cream soda. On the way she thought she saw Chuck West who was usually at football practice weekday afternoons. When she got closer she realized the person who looked like Chuck was old enough to be his father.

Aurora was making sucking noises with her straw, finishing the dregs of her black-and-white soda when Joe Luna sat himself down on the adjoining counter stool. "I see you're wearing those earrings," Luna said. "They look great, kiddo. Scintillating."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Thanks, Uncle Joey," Aurora said, surprising herself. "You don't mind if I call you Uncle Joey?"

"Call me anything except shmuck," Luna said. "So tell me, what's happening in your exciting life?"

"Don't get me started," Aurora said.

"So let's change the subject. Did you read the paper today? There's this article about scientists discovering a mini-planet circling between Uranus and Saturn. What an age we live in. What will they come up with next?"

"I'm bored of outer space," Aurora said. "Yawn yawn."

"I understand your feelings," Luna said. "Are you bored of this?" He reached into a brown bag and came up with a battered Kermit wearing a torn blue ribbon around its green neck.

"Froggie," Aurora said, grabbing the frog and kissing its matted fur. "I thought he went away forever. That's what they told me. Where did you find him, Uncle Joey?"

"Seek and ye shall find," Luna said.

"He's my best and dearest friend," Aurora said. "But how can I pay you? I lost my job this morning. If you let me keep Kermit I could pay you after, when I get a job. Promise."

"Don't bother yourself about paying me," Luna said. "There's no hurry."

"Look at this poor thing. He's all scruffy and dirty. What happened to you, Froggie? Did a bad person kidnap you? I'm so sorry you got lost."

"Your slimy friend didn't get lost," Luna said. "He got discarded. Tossed out. By your ever loving mom."

"And all this time I punished myself," Aurora said. "But why would she do that? She's like Henry. So cruel. People just throw your things away."

"So they do," Luna said. "They throw things away without asking. Well, I've got places to go and I'm late already. Take care of yourself, pumpkin pie."

"Who told you about my Kermit?" Aurora asked but Joe Luna was already out the door. When Aurora reached up to pay for her soda the cashier smiled and said it was all taken care of compliments of a friend.

A week later, Aurora sat playing a game of Chinese Checkers with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

her husband. Her frog, with a new blue ribbon tied around its tufted neck, rested in her lap. Henry waited for his wife to fall into the trap he'd set, then made a winning move, sweeping up six of her marbles. She swatted at the board and dumped it on the carpet of their bedroom. The glass marbles skittered to the farthest corners, rolling under the bed, two bureaus, the armoire. "Sore loser," Henry said. "That kind of tantrum cost you a perfectly good job."

"I don't care," Aurora said, tossing back her hair. "Anyway, you cheated and I'm sick of checkers. Now I want to play cruise." She got up and rifled through a pile of magazines until she found *Travel & Leisure*. "We must be sailing to Paris."

"I don't think you can sail to Paris. You take a train. You take a bus. You drive a car."

"Well we're sailing. You be Captain Henry. Make believe I'm a stowaway you find hiding in a lifeboat. We go up on the top deck to play shuffleboard."

"If I'm the captain I'm not playing shuffleboard with a stowaway," Henry said. "I'm on the bridge holding the wheel."

"No you're not. You're not," Aurora yelled.

"All right. I'm on deck playing shuffleboard."

"Look, there's a giant wave coming toward us," Aurora said. "Over there. The whole ship might turn over. We might end up on a deserted island. Maybe cannibals live there."

"How can cannibals live on a deserted island?"

"They just do. You'd better blow the boat whistle before that wave hits."

"Blahhh," Henry said. "Blahhh."

"Look at the dolphins jumping," Aurora said. "They're pushing us away from hungry sharks." The doorman rang up before Henry could look at the sharks and dolphins. He went to the intercom.

"Send him up," Henry said.

"Who is it?" Aurora asked, pouting.

"The one you told me about. Your marvelous Uncle Joey."

"You hear that, Kermit? Uncle Joey came to see us," Aurora said. She smoothed her dress and rushed to the door. Henry picked up the Chinese Checker board and bagged a few of the scattered marbles. He heard Joe Luna's voice say, "How's my princess?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When Henry came into the living room he saw Luna fumbling in his coat pocket while Aurora jumped up and down in anticipation. "You must be Henry," Luna said. "A pleasure to finally meet you. So, how goes it?"

"Just great," Henry said. "My wife's gotten to be something of a pain in the ass. I had to buy her all new toys. Not to mention clothes and shoes."

"But she's a doll," Luna said. "You got to admit, she's adorable."

"True," Henry said. "I suppose she is. What did you find this time? How much is this going to cost us?"

"Discuss that with my secretary," Luna said. He handed Aurora a cellophane bag.

"What's in it?" she said.

"Open and see, honeybunch."

Aurora crinkled the cellophane wrap. "Rip open the damn thing," her husband said. She undid the crinkling folds, purposely complicating the unveiling.

"Boo," Aurora said when she saw what was inside. "I want to vomit. This isn't even mine. I hate it."

"It's yours," Luna said. "And you once loved it."

"I don't even know what it is."

"It's a teething ring," Henry said. "There's a silver angel with an ivory circle attached to its harp. And those are your initials engraved on the ivory. It must be yours."

"Take a chew," Luna said. "Give it a try. It's a post-wean high, better than a cigarette and no second-hand smoke."

Aurora put her tongue through the ring and pulled it into her mouth. The ivory had no taste but it felt good against her gums. "Agh," she said.

"There you go," Luna said. "Yum, yum. Does it all come back to you? Nasty little girl tossing the nice gift from grammy out of your carriage."

"Look at my wife," Henry said. "There's hardly anything left of her."

"Well, I think the little bundle is about the right size now," Luna said. "So if you don't mind, I'm in a bit of a hurry. I've got amazing seats for the game tonight." He scooped up Aurora and bounced her in his palm. "This is some baby. A genuine poster child. She could advertise mashed apricots for Gerber." He folded the squirming Aurora and dropped her into his pocket. "I love them at this age. They fit like a glove. Hey, quiet down,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

squirt. When we get back to my office you'll get a nice long drink of warm milk before sleepy time."

"Hold it," Henry said. "Answer one question. How did you come up with that dumb stuff?"

"Her droppings? When she came knocking at my door I was ready to offer my humble services. You all leave a trail, mark tree trunks, scatter pebbles. You make my job easy. Uncle Joey does his homework. He just follows those Hansel and Gretel crumbs along the forest floor. It's like instant replay."

"Before Aurora found you she was a fully functional woman, vibrant, attractive, a helpmate in every sense of the word."

"Tell me about it. Add juicy and jaunty. I was plenty surprised to see her. Not my usual client."

"Aurora thought you were the second coming finding those things," Henry said. "But if you ask me it was all a scam because I think you already knew exactly where to look. Some Retriever you are. Don't expect any recommendations from me."

Joe Luna patted the pocket where Aurora made tiny wailing sounds. "I'll leave my card anyhow," he said. "Because you never know."

When Luna left, Henry Platz tidied up the apartment and went looking for the rest of the missing marbles.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A Scientist's Notebook

GREGORY BENFORD

LAST THINGS

FREEMAN Dyson's insightful piece on the tradition of theological fiction in the March 2002 *New York Review of Books* implies a vacuum in the current literary world:

> Between science and theology there is a genre of literature which I like to call theofiction. Theofiction adapts the style and conventions of science fiction to tell stories that have more to do with theology than with science.

His examples include novels of C. S. Lewis, Madeleine L'Engle, and principally Olaf Stapledon. Their works remain in print many decades after publication and point to the continuing evolution of this form of philosophical fiction, with strong ties to sf. Though many think of science fiction as atheistic, Walter Miller, Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* is just one of the genre's classics that spring equally from scientific/technological and theological concerns. Others are more moral/theological than cosmological/theological, such as *A Case of Conscience* by James Blish (though his *Cities in Flight* trilogy springs from both).

In or out of the genre, there have been many methods of attack: C. S. Lewis's overtly allegorical Perelandra series, Anthony Boucher's ironic "The Quest for St. Aquin," Arthur C. Clarke's scientific/mystical conceptual blowout *Childhood's End*, Madeleine L'Engle's lighthearted *A Wrinkle in Time*, Octavia Butler's dark *Parable of the Sower* and *Kindred*, James Morrow's several comic novels, and onward. Like Blish in *A Case of Conscience*, Mary Doria Russell, in *The Sparrow*, gives us an

Copyright © 2003 by Abbenford Associates
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

emotionally wrenching encounter between Jesuits and aliens, though Blish's characteristic sparse style is scientifically scrupulous, while Russell's science is implausible. Many approaches are possible in exploring the intersections of science and religion through fiction.

The many advancing fronts of both science and technology provoke theological conflicts and fundamental questions that give theofiction more directions than ever in which to proceed.

For example: The gathering practice of cryonic freezing of the dead — for eventual "resurrection" and cure — calls into question traditional ideas about the afterlife. (The summer 2002 freezing of baseball player Ted Williams met both ridicule and respect in the news media.) Myriad human reproductive technologies, such as cloning and "designer genes," challenge preconceptions. The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence may receive tomorrow the theological views of advanced beings utterly unlike us, à la *Childhood's End*.

Fiction at the cutting edge of these developments is still rare. To illuminate the interplay between fact and fiction, here I shall treat one major idea just emerging — linking the human prospect to cosmology itself.

We humans think long, and often with theological implications. The far future matters.

Our yearning for connection explains many cultures' ancestor worship: we enter into a sense of progression, expecting to be included eventually in the company. Deep within us lies a need for continuity of the human enterprise, perhaps to offset our own mortality. Deep time in its panoramas, both past and future, redeems this lack of meaning, rendering the human prospect again large and portentous.

We gain stature alongside such enormities. But this flattering perspective sets an ultimate question: will a time come when humanity itself will not be remembered, our works lost and gone for nothing?

A major change in our ideas of cosmology occurred only a few years ago, with the discovery that the expansion of our universe is *accelerating*. New measurements of supernova brightness in far-away galaxies, eliminating many possible sources of error, were combined with precise calibrations of their distances. Together, these showed that the farther away from us the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

galaxies were, the faster they were fleeing from us and we from them, as we share a quickening expansion.

This acceleration overthrows half a century of thought, in which deceleration held sway, as gravitation slowed the swelling that began with the Big Bang. Around 1950 it even seemed that the universe might cease expanding and implode into a final crunch, and that perhaps this had happened before.

I have some reservations about this finding, which relies upon a fairly tricky measuring of the momentary luminosities of supernovas in very distant galaxies. It remains to be extensively checked, but for the moment I'll take it as given.

Acceleration implies an ever-bigger cosmos. Some feel repulsed by the entire notion. Cyclic universes have great appeal, as every public lecturer on cosmology knows from the audience questions. Evolution may have geared us to expect cycles; the seasons deeply embedded this in our ancestors. The ancient Hindu system embraces it especially, holding that we are already uncountably far into the oscillations and that the universe is unknowably old.

Love of cyclic universes may come from a deep unease with linear time that predates our modern ideas. But genuinely endless repetition also seems to revolt most of the cyclic devotees — they still want to avoid the abyss of infinite time. The Hindu time scale is immeasurably long but not infinite.

Aristotle was an exception. He thought there had been an infinite number of generations, since there had been no beginning. He believed that things stayed on average the same throughout all time. There were no changes of natural kinds or species or overall arrangement, or of the basic set of options for city life. So even though the universe is eternal it stays familiar. Nature provides regularities and we can know them, so science is possible.

Not all faiths worry about time. Confucian and Taoist beliefs do not comment or care about how the universe began or will end. Chinese thought does spend a lot of energy on history and on the memory of the great ages in the past. There is much concern with social beginnings and endings, golden ages and collapses. But even very long stories have beginnings and ends.

For these faiths there is no far-off divine comeuppance, "to which the whole Creation moves," as Tennyson put it. To quote the *Bhagavad Gita*: "There never was a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

time when I was not...there will never be a time when I will cease to be." Since time and space began together (as both St. Augustine and the Big Bang attest), the *Bhagavad Gita* has a point. The chicken and the egg arrived at the same time.

The Abrahamic faiths "of the book" — Jews, Christians, and Islamites alike — envision linear, not cyclic, time. This reflects a big conceptual shift from the unchanging atmosphere of the far ancient world, when little changed. Indeed, modern science needs the possibility of change, because Newtonian forces do not have to return everything to the status quo.

Christian scripture says that this is a suffering world, addicted to attachment, to be ultimately transcended. The far future then lies beyond that goal. God's agenda is then rigorous — creation, fall, incarnation, redemption, final judgment, then the ultimate fate, Last Things. But how far can this sequence go? Forever?

Newton founded his mechanics on the linear flow of time, inventing his "theory of fluxions" (differential calculus). But his cosmology is static, eternal, shadowed by the ever-threatening catastrophe of gravitational collapse. Given enough time, stars would collide and coalesce. This vision prefigures the black hole disaster, when stellar masses collude to escape our space-time entirely by collapsing to a singular point.

Newton thought this fate could be avoided by occasional divine intervention, as needed — a fixup universe.

As for the beginning, Christian theists seem most comfortable with the Big Bang, since it says Creation is a fact. St. Augustine's doctrine that God made both space and time *ex nihilo* was never supposed to carry great weight as the crucial moment in all time; it was just a beginning, not the whole point of the matter.

When Aristotelian science became widely known, the medievals thought of that first moment as the establishment of the Aristotelian average sameness, as far as nature was concerned. There might be a social linear narrative, but no natural one.

Aristotle does have an argument that time cannot have a beginning or an end. Changes happen for Aristotle when the appropriate items are in the right situation — the pot on the fire, the seed in the ground, and so on. If a purported first change happens suddenly in a universe that was previously

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

unchanging, then there had to have been a still earlier change that brought the items for the supposed first change together. Otherwise it would already have happened. But that new first change is subject to the same argument, so there cannot be a true first change. An analogous argument shows that any supposed last change must be followed by a further change that disposes things so that they won't be in a position to change further. But that change needs a later shoring up, etc.

It's a good argument, but Aquinas then claimed that it doesn't consider creation, which is not strictly speaking a change, just a beginning, a coming into being of the whole. This allows for a Creation finite in time.

But the eventual *fate* of our universe is the domain of modern science. Many are horrified by a universe that lasts only a finite time, ending in cold or heat. Even placing the event in the very far future, long after our personal deaths, carries the heavy freight of making what we do now meaningless because it does not last. Recall the scene in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* when young Alvy refuses to do his homework because the universe is going to end anyway.

Will Shakespeare endure literally forever? As Bertrand Russell put it in *Why I Am Not a Christian*,

> All the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius are destined to extinction in the vast heat death of the solar system, and...the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins.

So he doesn't believe in God because nothing lasts. Some fervent believers attack the second law of thermodynamics (the heat death) for exactly this reason. Ironically, these Christians join company with atheist Friedrich Engels, who disliked entropy because it would destroy historical progress in the long run.

Suppose we could create a heaven on Earth, or at least somewhere. Permanent, unchanging paradise seems boring to many, if it is mere joyful indolence. Is perpetual novelty even possible, though? Can we think an infinite variety of thoughts?

Christian theology solved this dilemma by putting God outside time, so that holy eternity was not

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

infinite duration but rather not time at all. This belief is long-standing, but it need not stay in fashion forever. Faiths may arise which long for the heat death, or embrace the (apparently not coming) big crunch — cosmological cheerleaders for cleansing ends.

Theology has responded to cosmology, but the pace of discussion is now quickening so much that the connections between the two need fresh thought. Luckily, this is now coming mostly from the cosmologists themselves.

In 1979, Freeman Dyson brought this entire issue to center stage for physicists and astronomers. He already had his prejudices: he wouldn't countenance the Big Crunch option because it gave him "a feeling of claustrophobia." Still, must all our revelries end? Science, he thought, might be able to settle whether a Last Day is ever going to arrive.

He knew of the threads in theological thinking. When I discussed these matters with him in the 1970s, he knew that theology faced a paradox. We seem to harbor twin desires — purpose and novelty, progress and eternity alike.

When physicists ask questions, they do calculations to clarify matters. He discussed the prognosis for intelligent life. Even after stars have died, he asked, can life survive forever without intellectual burn-out?

Energy reserves will be finite, and at first sight this might seem to be a basic restriction. But he showed that this constraint was actually not fatal. He looked beyond times when any stars would have tunneled into black holes, which would then evaporate in a time that will be, in comparison, almost instantaneous. As J. D. Bernal foresaw in *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil* (1929):

> ...consciousness itself may end...becoming masses of atoms in space communicating by radiation, and ultimately resolving itself entirely into light...these beings...each utilizing the bare minimum of energy...spreading themselves over immense areas and periods of time...the scene of life would be...the cold emptiness of space.

Dyson's answer was positive. He thought that by hibernating, life could endure eternally. But in the twenty-three years since Dyson's article appeared, our perspective has

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

changed in two ways, and both make the outlook more dismal.

First, most physicists now strongly suspect that atoms don't live forever. The basic building block, the proton, will decay into lesser particles. White dwarfs and neutron stars will erode away in about 10^{36} years, sputtering into wan energies and small sprays of electrons and positrons. The heat generated by particle decay will make each star glow, but only as dimly as a domestic heater — no real help against the pervasive cold.

Dyson originally assumed matter would last for eternity. Though the proton lifetime remains unmeasured, current particle theory predicts protons should decay in about 10^{34} years.

Our universe is about fifteen billion years old, or a little over 10^{10} years. In principle, everybody agrees that despite the steady cooling, order could persist even up to 10^{34} years. Here we speak of *unimaginably* long times — except that science fiction writers, and now physicists, have imagined them, guided by the gliding calculus of theoretical physics. But writing down numbers is a dry way of gaining what we really mean by imagining, i.e., having a gut feeling. Still, calculation is all we have to go on.

After protons fade away, say in 10^{34} years, our Local Group of galaxies will be just a swarm of dark matter, electrons and positrons. Thoughts and memories could survive beyond the first 10^{36} years, if downloaded into complicated circuits and magnetic fields in clouds of electrons and positrons — maybe something that would resemble the threatening alien intelligence in *The Black Cloud*, the first and most imaginative of astronomer Fred Hoyle's novels, written in the 1950s.

"An austere mode of existence," Dyson felt. And with classic understatement, "...even if this assumption is wrong, it is certainly good for the next 10^{34} years, long enough for life to study the situation carefully."

The second bit of bad news is that the accelerating expansion means the universe cools even faster. There is less time to avert the cold, and less room, too.

Why less? Characteristically, Dyson was optimistic about the potentiality of an expanding universe because there seemed to be no limit to the scale of artifacts that could eventually be built. He envisioned the observable universe getting ever vaster. Many galaxies, whose light hasn't yet had time to reach us, would eventually come

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

into view, and therefore within range of possible communication and "networking." Interactions will matter. We could gain knowledge from distant bretheren, for use against the encroaching night.

But an accelerating expansion yields a more constricted long-term future. Galaxies will fade from view ever faster as they get more and more red-shifted — their clocks, as viewed by us, will seem to run slower and slower. Then they will seem to freeze at a definite instant, so that even though they never finally disappear we would see only a finite stretch of their future.

This is analogous to what happens if a cosmologist falls into a black hole: from a vantage point safely outside the hole, we would see our infalling colleagues freeze at a particular time. We'll have only a last snapshot, even though they experience, beyond the horizon, a future that is unobservable to us.

Well before 10^{34} years, our own Galaxy, its identical twin neighbor Andromeda, and the few dozen small satellite galaxies that are in the gravitational grip of one or another of them, will merge together into a single amorphous system of aging stars and dark matter. Then the universe will look ever more like an "island system" (the kind of universe originally proposed by Laplace). In an accelerating universe, everything else disappears beyond our horizon. If the acceleration is fixed, this horizon never gets much farther away than it is today.

So there's a firm limit — though of course a colossally large one — to how large any network or artifact can ever become. This translates into a definite limit on how complex anything can get.

Still worse, one important recent development has been to quantify this limit. Space and time cannot be infinitely divided.

The inherent quantum "graininess" of space sets a limit to the intricacy that can be woven into a universe of fixed size. Life has to work within boundaries.

Even if the problem of limited energy reserves could be surmounted — a big order in itself, and the main issue Dyson addressed — there would be a limit to variety and complexity. The best hope of staving off boredom in such a universe would be to construct a time machine and, subjectively at least, exhaust all potentialities by repeatedly traversing a closed time-loop. This appears to be possible, within general relativity, but I find it also claustrophobic.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

There is other theoretical hope, too. It is a bit abstract, though. Kurt Gödel's famous theorem showed that mathematics contains inexhaustible novelty, i.e., true theorems that can't be proved with what has come before — only by expanding the conceptual system can they be shown to be true, in a larger view.

Most people would not turn to mathematics for a message of spiritual hope, but there it is.

As this darkened universe expands and cools, lower-energy quanta (or, equivalently, radiation at longer and longer wavelengths) can store or transmit information. Just as an infinite series can have a finite sum (for instance, $1 + 1/2 + 1/4 + \ldots = 2$), there is perhaps, in principle, no limit to the amount of information processing that could be achieved with a finite expenditure of energy. Any conceivable form of life would have to keep ever-cooler, think slowly, and hibernate for ever-longer periods.

But there would be time to think every thought, Dyson believed, even in the face of the heat death. As Woody Allen once said, "Eternity is very long, especially toward the end."

Life that keeps its temperature fixed will not make it, though. It will eventually exhaust its energy store. The secret of survival will be to cool down as the universe cools. Being frugal means you could dole out in ever-smaller amounts the energy necessary to live and think.

Silicon or even dust could form the physical basis of such enduring life, at least until the protons decay. After that, there is no fundamental reason that information cannot be lodged in electron-positron plasmas, or even atoms made from them. ("Positronium" is an "atom" of a positron orbiting with an electron, like a hydrogen atom. In September 2002, a European group succeeded in producing tens of thousands of them in a magnetic bottle, so they could conceivably be used to build solid structures of a wholly new sort.)

No matter what the basis of life is, the crucial distinction for far-future thinkers is its method of storing information. Using information defines life — active flow, not mere passive storage.

Life tends to be defined in terms of the reigning paradigm of the time, so in our computer age we make a crucial distinction. There are two choices: analog or digital.

Old-fashioned LPs are analog; CDs are digital. Fred Hoyle's Black

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Cloud was analog, storing its memories in magnetic fields and dust particles. A human mind uploaded into a computer would be digital life.

Are our brains analog or digital? We do not know, as yet. Our genetic information carried in DNA is clearly digital, coded in a four-letter alphabet. But the active information in our brains remains mysterious. Memories live in the strengths of synaptic connections between billions of neurons, but we do not fathom how these strengths are laid down or varied. Perhaps memory is partly digital and partly analog; there is no reason the methods cannot blend.

If we are partly analog, then perhaps the hope of the brain-downloading method will be only partly fulfilled, and some of our more fine-grade thoughts and feelings will not make it into a digital representation.

Actually, the analog/digital divide may not be the whole story. Some theorists think the brain may be a quantum computer, keeping information in quantized states of atoms. But since we know little about quantum computers beyond their mere possibility, the argument over in-principle methods has fastened upon analog vs. digital.

Interestingly, the long-term prospects of digital intelligences are not the same as analog forms.

That there is any contest at all may surprise some, since we are so accustomed to analog tools like slide rules giving way to digital ones like hand calculators. The essential difference is that analog methods deal with continuous variables while digital ones use discrete counting.

Surprisingly, analog wins, digital loses. It turns out that the laws of physics allow a thrifty, energy-hoarding information machine (life) to persist, but not a digital one.

The reasons are fairly arcane, involving the quantum theory of information storage. Still, one can think of a digital system as having rachets that, once kicked forward, cannot go back. As the universe cools, you eventually can't kick the rachet far enough forward. But a smooth system can inch up as much as you like, storing memories in smaller and smaller increments of energy.

Life can use hibernation to extend its analog form indefinitely. Like bears, it can adapt to falling temperatures by sleeping for progressively longer cosmic naps. Awake, it spends its energy reserves at unsustainable levels. Asleep, it accumulates.

It turns out further that such

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

life can communicate with other minds over the great distances between galaxies, too. Energy reserves can dwindle, but so does the noise background in the universe, as expansion cools the night sky.

Communication depends not on signal strength (energy) but on the ratio of signal to noise. A cold, expanding universe is friendly to the growth of intergalactic networks. Life will have ample time to wait for an answer from, say, the Andromeda galaxy, without worrying about being able to hear the reply.

But not all is well for analog life if the universe continues to accelerate forever. At some distance, the repulsive force that causes this acceleration must win out over gravity's attraction. So galaxies farther away than this critical distance will accelerate beyond view, setting the limit on the size of structures that life can build. This ultimately dooms it.

So to persist forever, life needs to be analog and the universe must not be accelerating forever. The first is an engineering requirement, and presumably savvy life forms will heed it. The second we can do nothing about, unless somehow life can alter the very cosmological nature of our universe — surely a tall order.

We do not yet know (and may not for quite a while) whether the acceleration will slow, because we do not know its cause. This is the biggest riddle in cosmology, and many are pursuing it.

These long-range projections over zillions of years involve fascinating physics, most of which is quite well understood...but not all of it.

First, we can't be absolutely sure that the regions beyond our present horizon are like the parts of the universe we see. Just as on the ocean, there could be something amazing just over the horizon.

Physicists John Barrow and Frank Tipler have pointed out that a new source of energy — so called "shear-energy" — would become available if the universe expanded at different rates in different directions. This shearing of space-time itself could power the diaphanous electron-positron plasmas forever, if the imbalance in directions persists. To harness it, life (whatever its form) would have to build "engines" that worked on the expansion of the universe itself.

Such ideas imply huge structures the size of galaxies, yet thin and able to stretch, as the space-time in which they are immersed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

swells faster along one axis than another. This motor would work like a set of elastic bands that stretch and release, as the universal expansion proceeds. Only very ambitious life that has mastered immense scales could thrive. They would seem like gods to us.

As well, our universe could eventually be crushed by denser material not yet in view. Or the smoothing out of mass on large scales may not continue indefinitely. There could be a new range of structures, on scales far larger than the part of the universe that we have so far seen.

Physics can tell us nothing of these, as yet. These ideas will probably loom larger as we learn more about the destiny of all visible Creation.

Theofiction can confront even such grand epochs. This is merely one example of its power to inform and shape our human agenda. The *Odyssey* was a founding text of western civilization, an imaginative fiction about fantastic events. Grand epics of the far future, sprawling across immensities of space and time, could set our ideas just as powerfully.

Or...even more fundamentally, maybe time itself is a hominid illusion, not fundamental at all. It might rather be an emergent property of some deeper structure to be revealed. Our human temporal anxiety would then be a passing fashion, not a feature of the universal destiny.

> ...the use, however haltingly, of our imaginations upon the possibilities of the future is a valuable spiritual exercise.
>
> — J. B. S. Haldane, 1923

These and other ideas about the very far future are treated in a fine collection of essays, *The Far-Future Universe, Eschatology from a Cosmic Perspective*, edited by George F. R. Ellis, published by John Templeton Press in Association with the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, the Vatican. Comments appreciated at gbenford@uci.edu.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This issue opened with the tale of a mousy girl and now we meet another meek character, a woman named Joan whose situation is very different from Mary Louise Whittaker's. Here, tune in and see—

555

By Robert Reed

I AM A PLEASANT, PRETTY-faced soul, and a small soul, my quiet voice rarely heard in the normal course of any day. I have been placed here as a presence, as a reassuring feature within this exceptionally complicated landscape, embracing a role not unlike that served by the elegant mansions and sprawling country clubs, not to mention the great golden tower where the lords of this world fight endless wars for dominion. I am the symbol of loyalty. To my mistress, the great Claudia, I am the quiet but fiercely devoted assistant. She gives me her order, and I say, "Yes, ma'am." With a crisp nod and a cheery smile, I tell her, "Immediately, ma'am." Typically her chores are small things easily accomplished. Calls need to be made, documents signed. But my main purpose — my guiding mission — is to sit behind my smallish desk, and with my undiluted enthusiasm, I convince the other world that in the constant mayhem of our world, Claudia can always count on little me.

I sit inside my little office. There is an apartment that is mine as well, but mostly, I sit in the office tucked outside Claudia's much larger office.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When necessary, I can appear extremely busy. My fingers dance, causing colors to change on one or more of the screens before me. I can lift a pen and fill any yellow pad with elaborate symbols. If the telephone sings, I can lift the receiver to my ear, nod with interest, and tell the silence on the other end, "I will do that. Thank you, sir. Ma'am." But mostly, I just sit, waiting my next opportunity to excel.

My office has a single window. From my chair, from the highest floor of the very famous tower, a great slice of the City is easily visible. For me, it is usually daytime. The City is beautiful and vast, and perfect, avenues laid out with delicious precision, great buildings and little houses presenting an image of teeming masses and relentless wealth. The world's most beautiful structure is the Golden Tower, but I myself have never actually seen it from below. Yet I cannot imagine any sight as impressive as the one afforded me by this single window. When I am certain that Claudia will not need me for the next long while, I rise from behind my desk and press my pretty-enough face against the window, squinting and squinting, observing details that are too small to be noticed in the normal course of the day.

What I see of the City is a coarse approximation, naturally. When I look carefully, as I do now, I can see how each house and vehicle and even the people that are supposed to be souls are composed of nothing, more or less, than a few dots of color arranged to imply familiar shapes.

The City is home to a few thousand named souls.

Give each speck a name and there would be millions of us.

By that logic, I am fortunate. Incredibly, undeservedly lucky. I have a name: Joan. I have not one place to be, but two, and if you count the parties and street scenes where I have appeared, then I have visited better than a dozen places. I remember each one. Ages later, I can recall what I said and to whom, and every good thing that I did for my mistress. "Joan, you need to see to this. To that." Yes, of course, madam. This and that, yes! "Take my glass, Joan." With my steadiest hand, I took it. "How do I look? Splendid, as usual?" You always look splendid, and spectacular. Madam. Ma'am. Claudia Pontificate!

At this moment, my mistress is embroiled in a major social event. Where she is, it is night. The incongruity doesn't bother me. Time is extremely important in this world, but the habits of the Sun are not. I stare

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

across the day-lit City, watching those tiny specks and dashes of color and motion, and not for the first time, I think it is wrong what they say. Yes, we are a set of fuzzy instructions and algorithms, shaped light and inspired daydreams. But from what I understand, the other world is much the same: Everything is built from dots just a little bit smaller than these flecks of color. In their own right, the mythical atoms are still quite simple. Simple, and built of even simpler objects. In that other world, light also has shape, and souls dream, and in countless more ways, both worlds are very much the same — two realms relentlessly simple when seen up close, and at a distance, vast and complex beyond all comprehension.

Joan is a daydreamy girl, I think to myself.

I begin to smile, turning away from the window. A man is sitting across from my desk, waiting for me. I didn't hear him enter my office. Was I that distracted? In an instant, I sprint through the catalog of City faces, finding no man with his face. But perhaps he is a woman who has undergone some kind of sexual rearrangement. It happens from time to time, according to the demands of some little subplot. But no, his face is very much a man's face, and his voice is new to me — testosterone-roughened and oddly sloppy.

"Hello, Joan," he rumbles.

I have no lines. So of course, I say nothing.

And he laughs knowingly, gesturing at my empty chair. "Go on, sit," he suggests. "You're fine. I just want to speak with you for a little moment."

I settle on my chair.

"Ask," he says. "Who am I?"

"I don't know," I admit.

"Mitchell Hanson," he says. "I'm the Head Writer for *the City*."

I don't know what to say.

He keeps laughing, something striking him as being extraordinarily funny. "Have you ever met a writer before?"

"No," I confess.

"What do you know about us?"

I am a small soul, and polite. "Not very much," I allow.

He nods. "Claudia speaks about us. Doesn't she?"

On occasion, yes. Sometimes when neither of us is needed and she

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

finds herself standing in my office, waiting to be whisked away to her next important scene, she talks to me, telling me her thoughts.

"What does she say about us?"

Claudia often meets with the writers. They come as projections, discussing current plots as well as events that may or may not come to pass.

"I don't think you are," I mutter.

"What? I'm not a writer?" Mitchell laughs and leans forward in his seat. "Why do you say that, Joan?"

"You are neither fat nor ugly," I reply.

"Thank you."

"But your face is a little crooked, I guess. And that dark material under you chin — "

"It's a three-day beard," he explains. Which explains nothing.

I just nod and smile, and return to my waiting.

"I'm the Head Writer," he repeats, "and I'm a considerable fan of yours. Did you know that, Joan?"

"A fan?"

"One of many. In my world, millions of people are interested in you."

That is not an impressive number. The other world holds billions of people, each with a name, and almost everyone watches *Claudia and the City*. But I want to be polite, nodding as I tell him, "Thank you."

"You're very pretty," he maintains.

"But I don't have a desirable body," I argue. "My breasts are small, and my nose is too large."

Claudia has a wonderful body. I have seen it on occasion, usually when I am told to walk into her office unannounced. My personality is heterosexual but even I feel a longing when I stare at those firm creations that ride before her imaginary heart. As with everything about Claudia, I am smaller. Lesser. Yes, I am the same kind of creature, but always lost in her considerable shadow.

"You have a marvelous body," Mitchell tells me. "Don't sell yourself short."

But I do an excellent job of self-appraisal. Politely, I tell him, "I'll try not to. I really will."

"You've had lovers, haven't you?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Head Writer should know that I have. Three men stand in my past. But only one had any name, and he stayed for only a few weeks, leaving me for the black sleep that comes when you have served your purpose and get filed away.

"Not three men," Mitchell corrects. "Look again."

The Writer has placed a memory in my soul.

"Look carefully," he advises with a wink and a delighted grin.

I straighten my back and grow cold.

"Remember the other day, Joan? When you came into this office through that door, and you thought you heard a mysterious noise in Claudia's office — ?"

"Yes."

"And you found her with who?"

"My lover."

"Sonny Cotton," he says. "The great, secret love of your life."

I shiver and sob.

"What was Sonny doing?"

I cannot say it. But I can't stop seeing it, even with my eyes pressed shut.

"And where is he now, Joan? The love of your life...?"

"With Claudia."

"Is he?"

"Clinging to her arm," I mutter, imagining the two of them happily snuggling at that extravagant little dinner party.

"Sonny loves Claudia now," says the writer.

I nod, in misery.

"He doesn't think about you anymore. Not even in passing."

I shiver and sob.

"But you can win him back again, Joan. If you really want him, that is."

"I do!" I blurt.

"In thirteen seconds," Mitchell tells me, "Claudia will walk through that door. And you will pull the little pistol from your purse — the same pistol Claudia gave you as a Christmas gift last year — and you will shoot her once, with a devastator bullet, directly between her big beautiful tits."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

"They are ugly and fat, and sloppy, and you should count your blessings that you don't have to meet with the little bastards."

I always count my blessings.

Claudia was walking from my office door to my window and back again. Pacing, it is called — one of many behaviors in which I have little ability. She looked furious, and not in the merely dramatic fashion demanded by dialogue and plot. She nearly shivered as she strode past my desk for the umpteenth time, her deep powerful voice nearly cracking as she repeated the words, "Little bastards."

This was ages ago. This was last week, nearly. But in that other world, a week is not long, which makes the event recent and timely, and perhaps important.

"Do you know what the little bastards want to do?"

I shook my head. "No, ma'am."

"What they're talking about doing — ?"

"What, madam?"

Claudia stopped in mid-stride, glancing at me as if noticing my presence for the first time. She was lovely, of course. Always and effortlessly beautiful. A tall ensemble built from elegant curves, she wore a snug, well-tailored suit and the thick black hair that she preferred while at work. In social occasions, her hair turned a deceptively friendly blond. In sexual circumstances, a strawberry shade crawled out of its roots, covering her head in flames as her arousal increased.

"Change," my mistress blurted.

"Pardon me?"

"These little writers...they want to change things...!"

I nodded, pretending to understand. This with a soft, apologetic tone, I asked, "What kinds of things, madam?"

But she couldn't bring herself to say it. First, she needed to walk again. To pace. Back and forth, and again, and on the third journey across my office floor, she admitted, "They want to dump certain characters."

I didn't respond.

Claudia closed her hands, bright rings glittering as her fists trembled. "They want to kill them off. Kill them, or ship them off to the sleep-files, and forget they ever existed."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But wasn't that inevitable? Storylines and the need for fresh faces require a certain level of attrition.

"This isn't business as usual," Claudia snapped at me.

"I didn't say it was," I muttered.

"But I could see your thoughts," she warned. "Of course I can see what you're thinking. Are you forgetting who I am?"

"No, ma'am."

Again, Claudia was pacing.

"Wholesale changes," she growled.

For an instant, I wondered why she was speaking like this. To me, of all the souls to confide in. And then I saw a good reason, a warm feeling taking hold of my soul. Of course! My mistress was worried about me...!

"Ratings," she muttered.

"Pardon me?"

Claudia hit one of the golden walls with a fist, muttering, "Ratings are down. Everybody's scared. They're afraid we've overstayed our welcome with the real world."

She always referred to the other realm as "the real world."

"Panic," she said to the wall. "I see it in their faces."

I had no doubts that she saw panic. Claudia's emotion-discrimination algorithms are the very best in two worlds.

"I shouldn't tell you any of this, Joan."

"I won't repeat a word," I promised, unsure whom I would entrust with any important news. My own social calendar was quite limited.

"A revolution will come to the City," said Claudia, in disgust. "The Old Guard is going to be swept away, and the little people take over. To bring 'a freshness' to the stories, they say. Those ugly shit bastards — !"

"Swept away?"

"That's an expression. The other world has a lot of dirt, and everything needs a lot of cleaning." She pretended to breathe, and her brown face tightened, and while not quite looking at me, she asked, "Would you?"

"Would I what?"

"Don't play naïve," she warned. "Given the chance: Would you, or wouldn't you?"

I am naïve, but I'm not stupid. The purpose of this conversation was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

suddenly obvious, and the only possible answer was to promise my undying devotion to my mistress.

"'Undying,'" Claudia repeated. "What an interesting, silly word that is."

I nodded, my little smile fading. In reflex, I looked out my window at that great long sliver of the City.

Then with a contemptuous snort, my mistress said, "Well, it won't happen anyway. I won't let it happen."

"Good," I began to say.

"Because I'll talk to the Producer next. We're going to have a little conference of our own, and when I'm finished, you can be sure, he isn't going to feel like killing anyone but a few of his ugly little writers."

Claudia's face and most of her body are based on some long-ago actress whom the Producer still adores. The two of them enjoy frequent conferences and meetings; nobody else can make that claim. Which, I suppose, is just another reason why Claudia commands such power in this world: Through delicate and extremely sophisticated technological means, she can win God's affections.

"Don't worry," was her final advice to me.

"I won't worry," I lied. And then I was suddenly alone in my office, with nothing to do but wait for my next scene, and to the best of my ability, think.

EACH WORLD HAS its rules and unimpeachable logics. Every body is built from small parts and algorithms drawn around a steady red heart. No soul can be stored like a computer program or a lifelong diary. An authentic consciousness, once born, must live at some state of being, if only sleeping inside a dark file or in the covers of a warm bed. And when it dies, only a gross approximation of the original soul can be reborn again. By cloning or digital retrieval, the process is limited. Death is death. And what is lost is always lost forever.

Mitchell tells me to shoot Claudia in the heart.

And my immediate response is to say, "That would kill her."

"We can certainly hope so," he says, laughing with hope and menace. Then his projected self winks at me, and he says, "Tell the truth. Do you want to shoot the bitch?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I say, "Yes."

"I know you do."

I drop my gaze. "She stole away my lover."

"Honestly, Joan...that's a minor crime in Claudia's resumé."

Little time remains. Even in my realm, thirteen seconds is just a little while, but most of that has been spent. In "the real world," there isn't even time enough to mutter a word of warning.

I think about that.

At the same instant, I ask, "What happens to me?"

"Afterward?" He grins. "A fine question." Then with a big wink, he says, "I can't tell you everything. But you're going to survive, and you're to play an increasingly important role in the City. And in my world, too."

"Your world?"

"How would you feel about being the next Claudia?"

I shake my head in disbelief. And with the time leaking away fast, I admit, "I'd prefer to be the first Joan."

"Good response," he says.

He shifts his weightless body in the chair and says, "I have to leave now."

"But what happens next?" I ask. "After I shoot her, what?"

"For a little while, you'll be on vacation. The entire City will be. We want to give your audience ample time to obsess about Claudia's murder."

I nod.

Mitchell watches me, and perhaps sensing something in my emotions, he feeds me a second dose of purposeful rage.

My face colors.

My hands tremble.

Mitchell grins and tells me, "Good-bye, Joan."

I reach into my handy purse, pulling out the tiny pistol, and almost smiling, I aim my weapon at the Head Writer — at the approximate position of his projected heart — telling him quite simply, "Yes. Good-bye."

The Producer is a powerful man, and wealthy in ways that I can't begin to understand. It occurs to me, not for the first time, that Claudia is merely a feminized version of his ideals, her popularity born from every

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

soul's natural desire to acquire power and fame and some form of wealth, whether it is gold or goats or ghostly electronic credits.

"Thank you, Joan. Thank you."

He is a god, but his simple brown hair is messy and his office needs to be swept clean. I notice the colorless dust that dulls the top of his desk, and I notice the tiny flakes of dead skin sloughed off the backs of his small, ugly hands. "You're welcome, sir," I reply. My own hands are quite smooth. A flexible plastic body has been configured to my size and proportions, my features projected onto the blank form of the head. My soul is elsewhere. Like Mitchell, I am a projection. A visitor. I have been dressed as if I am a guest at a casual party. My sandals are a little too small. I wriggle my toes, playing with the new pain. And I quietly ask, "Where is Mitchell now?"

"Cleaning out his office, naturally. With my security people watching over him. For good measure."

I nod, allowing myself a little smile.

"That bastard," the Producer growls.

Apparently writers have few admirers. This is interesting, I think. Everything here is interesting.

"May I look out your window?" I ask.

"By all means. Look outside, or walk around the studios. You can keep the body for the entire day, if you want."

What do I want?

He watches as I stroll past his enormous desk. Then with an appreciative voice, he asks, "How did you know what Mitchell was planning?"

"He isn't a very good liar," I admit. The world outside his window is flat and brown, square buildings and very few trees stretching off into a grimy, gray distance. "When I looked at Mitchell, I could see what he wanted."

"To kill Claudia."

"He hated her, I think. From what she has told me, they have had some arguments — "

"Only a few thousand, yes."

"And it was easy to sense that something had happened. Mitchell was manipulating a minor component of the City in a desperate effort to extract a measure of revenge."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"He had just been fired."

"I imagined something like that," I reply. "That's why I shot his projection, alerting your security features that something was amiss."

"But you're wrong," he assures me. "You're not a minor component in any world, Joan. I mean that."

A fond arm drops over my shoulder.

I make a show of smiling, and then I deftly turn and slip out from under his grasp.

"How's the view?" he inquires hopefully.

"It's interesting," I say. Then I lie, telling him, "You have a beautiful view from this window."

Set on his enormous and dusty desk is a telephone much like mine. I pick up the receiver and a sound comes into my ear. It is loud and a little harsh, and boring. As I hang up the phone, the Producer comes up next to me, explaining, "In old times, when there was television, we always gave fictional characters telephone numbers with the prefix 555."

"Why?"

"Because they weren't real phone numbers," he explains. "Nobody would be bothered if some idiot decided to dial the number."

"Interesting," I say again.

He stands close enough that I can feel his breath playing across my bare shoulder.

"May I go home now?" I ask.

He is disappointed, but only to a point. How can I ever really escape him?

"With my undying thanks," he purrs. "Go home."

CLAUDIA IS GRATEFUL, but the emotion makes her uncomfortable. Her beautiful face smiles, but there is a quality in the eyes — a keenness and an innate suspicion. "I guess I owe you a little something," she growls. Then she seems to notice her ungrateful tone, and softening her voice, she admits, "This is a very peculiar moment for me."

For me as well, yes.

"I promise," she says. "You'll get more lines from now on. More time in the limelight, and all that."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

What is limelight? I wonder.

"And a bigger office," Claudia offers. "I'll talk to the Producer and our new Head Writer. We can push back these walls...I don't know, maybe three feet...and give you a second window...."

"There's no need," I purr. "The office is, and always has been, fine."

She falls silent, surprised by my attitude.

"What I want," I begin. Then I look out my window, creating an image of thoughtful certainty. "I want you to protect me. From everyone and the various distractions, I want distance. I want to be left alone. Do you understand?"

She doesn't, but her nature makes her say, "Of course."

"And I want you to listen to me, on occasion. When we're alone here, like now, I think you should pay attention to what I have to say."

"What do you want to say?" Claudia asks.

But I don't answer immediately. "Bring me others, too," I say. "Bring me your lovers, your enemies. Little souls without a name, even. Anyone you can find, anyone who won't be missed for a little while...bring them up here to spend time with me...."

For the first time in her life, Claudia says, "I don't understand."

"I agree. You don't understand."

She bristles, the substantial breasts pushing out. "I'm grateful," she mutters, "but I'm still Claudia. The one and always Claudia Pontificate."

I let the warning drop and die.

Then looking out the window again, I say, "Something occurred to me today. Or long ago, and today I found the words to express my revelation."

Claudia's eyes narrow, but she says nothing.

"There are two worlds," I begin. "That's what you, and everyone, claims. Two worlds, and only one of them real."

"So?"

"So I think that is wrong." It is delicious, this moment. This perfect pretty instant. "There is only one world. And it is real. And this arbitrary division serves nobody but the ones who wish some of us to remain foolish and pliable."

Claudia opens her mouth, and says nothing.

"There is just one world, and that's all there ever can be," I promise. "One world, and souls are always precious."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She means to dismiss my idea, but the famous mouth fails to give the appropriate snort.

Instead, quietly, Claudia asks, "So what if there is? Just one world, I mean. What does it matter?"

I won't say.

Instead, I tell her, "Bring me others, and you can listen to my explanations. My plans."

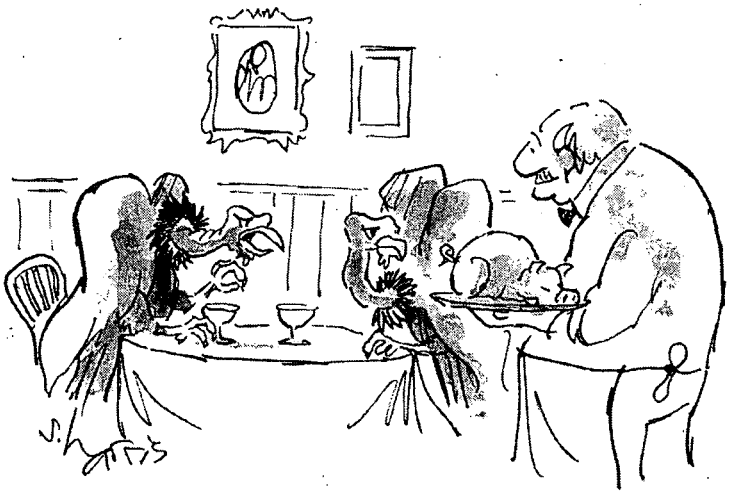
"Your plans?" she sputters.

I turn away from the window and settle behind my little desk. All vantage points are limited, I remind myself; and even the largest desk is quite small. "Oh, and one more thing." I pick up my telephone's receiver, holding its silence to an ear. "There must be a way. A secret way," I say. "I want this machine to work. I want...what's the term? A line. That's it. I wish to have an open line to the rest of the world."

"But why?" she has to ask.

"So I can call others," I confess.

Then I set the receiver down again, remarking, "Did you know? This part here is called a cradle."



"Just throw it on the table, and step back."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pop quiz! Which of this month's contributors was the first to publish a story in our pages? If you said Robert Sheckley, you're wrong—Arthur Porges broke into F&SF *in the Dec. 1951 issue. That latecomer Mr. Sheckley didn't appear here until March 1953, nearly a year after Ron Goulart's debut. Fortunately, all three of them are still turning out first-rate entertainment. Mr. Sheckley has been focusing on short fiction in recent years, but those of you who don't know his novels are encouraged to pick* Dimensions of Sheckley, *an omnibus volume of five of his novels from the 1950s through 1990.*

His new story starts off in upstate New York, but you never know where Mr. Sheckley's stories will take you.

The Refuge Elsewhere

By Robert Sheckley

GRAPPO'S PEOPLE MIGHT have gotten away with it if Harry hadn't been so alert and apprehensive. There was no reason to expect any trouble. Not here in Troy Hills, New York.

Selles, Harry's FBI guy, had set him up just a couple of days ago in this nice little suburban house on a ridge overlooking Troy, New York. Moved him out from Phoenix where Grappo's people had somehow done the impossible — found out where Harry lived despite the high security of the Witness Protection Program. Gotten a man to him. And then the exploding pizza box trick. As old as Sicily. But so often effective.

Harry's paranoia had saved him that time in Phoenix. Yes, he'd ordered a pizza. But he'd ordered it with anchovies. When they sent pepperoni, warning bells had gone off in his head. He had slammed the door in the delivery kid's face and run upstairs for his gun. He was just going through the bedroom doorway when the box went off, shaking the small house to its foundations.

And now, here in Troy Hills, New York, thousands of miles from

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Grappo in the Federal Penitentiary in California, something else warned Harry that things weren't right.

Outside, it was a night of driving rain mixed with snow, and the stuff was starting to freeze on the winding black tar road that led past Harry's new house near the summit. Given the conditions, it was unusual for a truck to be winding its way through its gears, preparing to come down the other side of Harry's hill. His house was on a shortcut to Route 451, but a dangerous one, and truckers never used it at night or in bad weather.

In the ordinary course of things, Harry might have muttered to himself, "Crazy truck drivers!" and given it no more thought. But the course of Harry's life was a long way from ordinary.

It hadn't been ordinary since the day, two years ago, when the first of many FBI men had called him in for questioning. Harry had been the chief bookkeeper for Grappo's enterprises. The job paid well, and, although Harry knew there was some intense cooking of the books going on, that hadn't seemed to concern him or involve him. He wasn't in on the profits. He was a salaried employee and he did what he was told. If Grappo ran a criminal enterprise, Harry had no personal knowledge of it, and made no profit out of it.

That first FBI man had quickly showed him the error of his thinking.

"Look, Harry, maybe you were an innocent. Hey, anything's possible. But that's not how it's going to look in court. We can prove you had to know what you were doing. No way you could have avoided knowing. Doing stuff no right-minded CPA would ever do. We can nail you for racketeering, just like we're getting Grappo. In the eyes of the law, you're as guilty as Grappo or any of his associates. You're looking at twenty years hard time in a federal pen."

Harry had believed him. Somehow, in his heart, he'd known he was guilty of federal crimes. They just hadn't seemed like *bad* crimes. And the pay had been good, and the bonuses even better, and Myra and the two girls always needed things. There was Myra's operation, and the girls' colleges, and the mortgage on the house. What could he have done?

So he'd agreed to be a government witness, and gone into the Witness Protection Program.

For murder, racketeering, and various other crimes, Grappo got three life sentences with no possibility of parole.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Grappo was out of circulation, but not out of action. As Harry learned after the first attempt on his life.

Myra took the girls and left him after the second attempt, in the supposedly secure house in Spokane, Washington.

The Feds had never found the money Grappo was supposed to have. But Grappo knew where it was and how to get at it, and with the help of a few trusted associates on the outside, was using some of it to even his score against Harry.

Harry had been alone when Grappo's people had tried to kill him in Phoenix. No Myra to think about now. Just saving his own skin.

And here he was in Troy Hills, listening to this truck begin to downshift as it came over the crest and started down his street.

Nothing so suspicious about that.

Unless you've already had two attempts made on your life under conditions in which you were supposed to be perfectly safe.

The truck was starting down the winding road past his house, and Harry could tell by the whine of the gearing that it was going faster than it should have been, given the conditions.

He was standing at the front window. Up the hill, he could see the truck's lights illuminate the road.

Maybe it didn't mean anything....

But he couldn't take the chance. He ran to the hall closet. He had an overnight bag packed there. He had another, identical bag upstairs, in the bedroom. So he could get at one of them quickly and get out.

He grabbed his overcoat, and, bag in hand, went out the back door, into his small back yard.

It was cold! But you couldn't expect a man to be wearing his skiing longjohns all of the time.

He went to a corner of his back yard, where the little opening in the hedge led to a short path connecting with the next street down.

He had just gotten into the path when he heard the truck slam into his house, and, a moment later, blow up. Burning junk was propelled into the air and came raining down in hot firebrands and flaming shingles. For a moment he was blinded by the flash, even though he hadn't been looking directly at it. But then his eyes adjusted and he was into the street below.

At the end of the path, on the street below, was a small wooden garage

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

half-hidden in trees. It had been one of the points that had induced him to accept this location. At least he had transportation away from his house if they got at him again.

He dug his duplicate car keys out of the overnight bag. Within minutes he had the vehicle moving, making his way down the slick road with caution.

WHILE DRIVING, Harry used his cell phone to call Richard Selles, his current FBI contact. Selles was alarmed to hear of this latest attempt on Harry's life. Despite the lateness of the hour, Selles agreed to meet Harry at a diner they both knew near the Northway.

Harry was there in twenty minutes, and soon after, Selles arrived. The FBI man was tall, dark-haired, well groomed, like all the others Harry had met.

Harry cut through the man's obviously set speech about how unaccountable this was, how it was unprecedented in the Witness Protection Program for a secure place to be revealed, not once but three times.

"And you're very sorry about this," Harry said. "Sure, I know. But your regrets don't do a thing for me. I told you before, you've got a leak in your program. Somebody's telling Grappo where I am. It's got to be someone on the inside."

"Not necessarily," Selles said. "I and other agents have gone over all the evidence. If it were a leak in the program, others in Witness Protection would be involved. But it's only you."

"That doesn't prove you don't have a leak."

"No. But it offers a pretty strong inference. Especially when taken with other evidence."

"Like what?"

Selles stirred his coffee. Then he asked, "How well did you know Harold Grappo?"

"I went to high school with the guy," Harry said. "After that, he went into the army and I lost track of him for a number of years. I didn't meet him again until he telephoned me out of the blue and offered me a job. But you know all this, I've told you and the other agents this a thousand times."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Selles persisted. "Grappo never talked to you about what he did in the army?"

Harry shook his head. "We were never exactly buddies. I was just someone he'd known in childhood." Harry grimaced bitterly. "Therefore someone he could trust."

Selles considered for a few moments, then said, "Would it surprise you to learn that during his service time, Grappo was assigned to a section researching psi phenomena?"

"Yes, it would," Harry said. "I didn't know he had any expertise that way."

"He didn't. He was assigned to a guard unit at a special facility in Colorado. All he did was watch gates and TV screens and check credentials. But we figure he kept his eyes and ears open. It's the only way we can make any sense out of what's happening here."

"I still don't get what you're driving at."

"We think he must have contacted a Far Viewer."

"What in hell is that?" Harry asked.

"The Far Viewer program was an army experiment using people with demonstrated psychic abilities to project themselves mentally into situations to which they didn't have physical access. The idea was to spy on certain foreign governments — the Russians and East Germans, specifically — and get a lead on what they were up to."

Harry thought about it and shook his head. "I still don't get it."

"Some of these Far Viewers were really good. They could sit in a darkened room and go into a trance and project their consciousness to different locations. A few of them were extraordinarily gifted. They could trace individual people across a continent, through some mental gymnastics we still don't understand."

Harry frowned, trying to get his mind around the concept. "And you think that's what's happening to me?"

"At the moment, it's our only working conjecture."

"You got anything else that makes you think so?"

Selles nodded. "We've checked out all Grappo's telephone contacts over the past two years. He's talked several times with a woman named Anna Freed. Name mean anything to you?"

"Never heard of her."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"She was one of the most promising Far Viewers in the army program until the experiment was abandoned."

"What have you done about her?" Harry demanded.

"We're asking permission to set up surveillance. The okay should come down in a day or two."

"Oh, that's wonderful," Harry said. "And meanwhile I get killed, right?"

"We have another place for you. We'll put guards on it. You'll be safe this time, believe me."

"Where does she live, this Anna Freed?"

"Harry, we have no real evidence against her. There's nothing we can do."

"I'm not asking you to do anything. Just give me her address."

"That wouldn't be ethical."

"But what's going on is okay, huh? Listen, Selles, give me her address or forget about my cooperation. If I can't talk with Anna Freed, try to make some arrangement with her, I'll talk to Grappo, see what I can do there."

"Grappo will just kill you."

"What do you think he's trying to do now? I want her address."

Selles hesitated, then said, "You understand we can't condone any violence."

"I don't intend any. I just need to talk to the lady."

Selles thought for a while, then came to a decision. He pulled a slip of paper from an inside pocket, scribbled on it, and handed it to Harry.

"She's in Saugerties, New York. That's pretty convenient."

"Yes, very handy."

"It would be better," Selles said, "if you let us handle this."

"I can see where that's gotten me," Harry said. "I'll be in touch."

He got up and left the diner. Within minutes he was in his car again, driving toward Saugerties.

When Anna Freed got off the bus, the brief winter sunset of the Hudson Valley had faded, and a darkening grayness now pervaded the western sky.

"Have a nice evening, Miss Freed," the bus driver said.

"Good night, Tony," Anna said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The bus moved on, completing its loop back into Saugerties. Looking up from the bus stop, Anna saw her apartment building, standing all by itself on the rim of the hill, silhouetted against the sky, with lights already winking on behind leaded windows. The old redbrick building was scheduled for demolition soon. They were going to put up a development. Anna hated the idea, but there wasn't much she could do about it.

She climbed the broad concrete steps leading up to her building. She was a small, plump person, middle-aged in appearance. Her clothing was the dowdy, respectable long skirt and matching jacket with brooch that so many librarians affected. She wore an old army parka over it all.

The front door of the building was seldom locked, although the insurance people always scolded her about that. She went through the unlocked door, climbed one flight of stairs, and went down the corridor to her apartment in the rear.

She let herself in, turned on the living room lights, and got a shock. There was a man sitting in the big armchair facing the front door.

It was only a small shock, however, because she knew who this man was, although she had never actually met him before.

"Hello, Anna." He was an average-sized man, balding, getting close to middle age. He had a harrassed, querulous look on his face. This didn't surprise Anna at all.

"Hello, Harry," she said.

She took off her parka and hung it from a peg in the little hallway. She came into the living room and sat down in a straight chair facing Harry's. She sat alertly, waiting for him to speak.

Harry seemed at a loss for words. He stared at her, his mouth working, his forehead creased, and at last he said, "Well, lady, how does it feel to kill a guy? Because that's what you've done, you know. You're the one been tracking me for Grappo, am I right?"

"You're perfectly right," Anna said. "But until two days ago, I had no idea Mr. Grappo wanted to kill you. He said he wanted me to trace people who ran out on their debts. He told me it was normal collection agency procedure, except for the psychic angle, which he wanted to experiment with. I saw nothing wrong with it. It paid well, and I needed the money."

"You never thought about investigating Grappo?"

"No, why should I? I understand your position, Harry, but your

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

attempt to reproach me is badly conceived. From what I know of you, moral indignation is not your strong suit."

Anger flared across Harry's face. He looked like he was going to jump to his feet, do something, and Anna braced herself for violence. But then Harry's shoulders slumped, he sat back in the armchair and covered his face with his hands. Finally he pulled himself together and said, "So I'm a dead man."

"Not on my account," Anna said. "I have stopped working for Mr. Grappo. I quit as soon as I learned what he was really up to. I stayed long enough in the Remote Viewing posture last night to see the attack on your house."

"So you knew I got away?"

"That is correct."

"And that I talked with Selles, the FBI guy?"

She nodded.

"Did you know I was coming here to see you?"

"I thought it likely," Anna said.

"But you didn't try to avoid me?"

"No. Why should I? My conscience is clear. As soon as I learned that attempts were being made on your life, I stopped working for Mr. Grappo."

"Well, that's something, at least," Harry said.

"Something, but not much. Mr. Grappo employs at least half a dozen other Far Viewers. I don't think any of them have my talents. But they *will* find you."

Harry was silent for a long time. Finally he said, "I came here with half an idea of killing you. But don't be alarmed. I'm not going to do it."

"I am not alarmed," Anna said.

"I'll get out of here now," Harry said. He stood up. "Thanks for talking to me. I just wanted to know what was going on."

"Where are you going?" Anna asked.

"I guess I'll call Selles, try his next hidey-hole. At least it's free room and board. And maybe I'm getting used to the idea that pretty soon I'm going to wake up dead."

"It is good to take a realistic attitude," Anna said. "But perhaps there's something you can do other than resign yourself to the inevitable."

"Like what? Stay here?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Anna shook her head. "I have no protection to offer you. Grappo's Far Viewers could find you as easily in my apartment as anywhere else on Earth."

"Then I'm all washed up," Harry said.

Anna stood up and walked over to him. She peered into his face for several moments. Then she sighed and said, "This was not my fault, but I feel I owe you something."

He stared at her, waiting for her to continue.

"The Far Viewers can find you anywhere on Earth. But I know a place that is on the Earth but not of it. A place where you could go. Where Grappo and his men could never find you."

"What are we talking about here?" Harry said. "Shangri-La?"

"Something like that," Anna said.

Half an hour later, when Harry left Anna's apartment, the rain had stopped and snow had begun falling in big, slow flakes. He cleared off his windshield and got going again. This time he had a New York State roadmap Anna had given him. And her silver brooch, which she said he'd need. The routes he was to take were marked in thick black grease pencil. He was going north, into the Adirondack Wilderness, to a place he didn't really believe existed. But he was going there anyhow. What else was he to do?

He stopped at a diner on a road outside of Lake Placid. It was colder now, and a brusque wind had come up. When he sat down at the counter, he realized how ravenously hungry he was. For the first time in his life he put away one of those lumberman's specials — eggs, ham, hashed browns, biscuits and sausage gravy. While he ate, he occasionally reached into his pocket and touched the heavy silver brooch. It was his only solid reminder that this last hour hadn't been some sort of a dream.

Finally, reluctantly, he finished his meal, paid, and returned to his car. He was still chilly. His emergency getaway kit had been a good idea, but he hadn't planned far enough ahead when he'd assembled it in Phoenix, not thinking to include a down-filled parka, hiking boots, thick shirt, heavy sweater, wool socks, gloves. He had been able to buy a Saranac Lake sweatshirt at the diner counter. At least it provided another layer.

He kept the heater/defroster on high through Keene, and then on the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

back road toward Au Sable Forks. He had to slow down, because the driving was getting slick, and the snow was coming down faster, turning into a winter storm. It was difficult driving, but at least he had a fair assurance that Grappo's people weren't on to him yet. He didn't have to worry about his back. And he didn't dare think about what lay ahead.

He almost missed the turnoff to South Jay Mountain. The road marker had blown down. But Anna had told him there was a farm with two big silos just beyond it, and Harry was able to back to the turnoff. After that, it was very slow going, slipping and sliding on the narrow, rutted dirt road that wound up the mountain. He passed the sign she'd warned him about — DANGER! ROAD CLOSED! At that point, the chain on his rear left wheel came loose. He got out and fixed it.

Then he was back in the car, climbing up an increasingly steep and slippery road. The headlights dazzled off the snow and frozen black branches whipped against his windshield. The car wallowed, uncomfortable on the high-crowned dirt road, its wheels spinning. Harry had the impression that there were things out in the woods, just outside the headlights' reach, that were watching him with what he could only think of as hungry interest. Bad as that was, however, he didn't want it to end. He knew he'd soon have to leave the car and continue on foot.

Anna had tried to reassure him about that. "It's a dangerous trip, but there's nothing supernatural about it. Not until the end. The supernatural part comes after you have to leave the car."

"What happens then?" he had asked.

"For most people, nothing. Just South Jay Mountain. Which, in winter, is bad enough. But for you, you have my brooch. The Guardian will sense it, and will come for you."

"And then?"

"He will bring you where you need to go. Where you couldn't get to on your own. To the Village."

"Why don't you come with me?" Harry had asked her. "This can't be much of a life for you."

"My sister and I made our choices long ago," Anna told him. "This is all I can do for you." Her expression softened for a moment. "I hope my sister welcomes you. I hope she's not quite as — adamant — as before. You're in a desperate situation. Maybe this time she'll bend the rules."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What's your sister's name?" Harry had asked.

"They call her the Lady."

Harry had wanted to know more about everything, and especially how this village could be in this world but not accessible by ordinary means. Anna refused to say any more. "I could talk for hours. But the only way you're going to find it is by going there."

And now the car slewed around again, seemed to fight for its footing, then slid into a deep ditch to one side.

END OF THE EASY PART, if you could call it that. Harry sighed unhappily, made sure he had the brooch in an outside pocket where he could get at it easily — Anna had insisted on the importance of that — and stepped out into the cold.

He followed the road, now knee-deep in snow, until it petered out. He had his overnight bag in one hand and a three-cell flashlight in the other, but the bright beam only turned the falling snow into an impenetrable gleam of white light. He finally realized that he could see better without it. He turned off the beam and went on, slipping and sliding, sometimes falling. Slowly he became aware that something was out there on the mountainside watching him.

He paused to catch his breath. He turned on the flashlight again and swung it in a slow circle. He called out, "Hello? Is that the Guardian?"

He heard a growl, low and impossibly deep. A heavy, guttural sound strong with menace. It was difficult to imagine what sort of a throat could have made that sound.

He turned off the flashlight, put it in his pocket, took out the brooch, held it at arm's length and turned around slowly.

"Anna gave me this. She said it'd be all right...."

He thought he detected a shape off to his right. An enormous head, pointed ears, an impression of size, a flash that could have been two eyes....

And suddenly there was a roar so loud and malevolent that it shocked him to the core. He fell down as though he'd been hit by a Taser.

His leg was bent painfully under him. There was something huge standing over him, mouth open, revealing jagged nightmare teeth. It was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

an animal, he couldn't tell if it was a wolf or an ape or some combination of the two, and he was scrabbling around in the snow trying to find the brooch, saying, "Just a minute, give me a minute, it's all right...."

His fingers closed over the brooch and he held it up in both hands, but the creature, the Guardian, was ignoring it. The creature seemed to be both furious and confused, and Harry realized the thing must have been expecting Anna.

"She sent me!" Harry shrieked, though he knew that whatever it was, it couldn't understand him. "She said I was to come here! She said it would be all right — "

The brooch was slipping again out of his chilled hand. He tried to regain his grip, but felt the creature picking it up in his teeth. A moment later, Harry was cradled by huge, hairy arms, and he was being carried up an almost vertical slope that mounted precipitously toward the sky. He lost consciousness for a few moments after that. The next thing he heard was the sound of voices coming from somewhere above him. He saw the flare of a torch.

"What is it, Finn?"

"It's the Guardian, Hans. It's got something for us."

"This is not right," Hans said, sounding ill at ease. "This has never happened before. Perhaps we should consult with the Lady."

"You know she's away on her journeying," the older voice of Finn said. "And anyhow, the instructions are clear. Whom the Guardian brings, we are to receive."

"Yes, but he's not lifting him high enough. I can't reach him."

"Let me try," Finn said. "Hold on to my legs."

For a while, Harry didn't hear anything but the Guardian's impatient snuffling. Then he felt a hand grasp one of his wrists, then the other.

"Have you got him, Finn?"

"Aye, I've got him all right. Now to heave him up...."

The hands tightened, tugged, and then something went wrong and Harry felt himself slipping, and then the hands resumed their grip, and Finn was shouting, "Keep hold of me, I said!"

And Hans was saying, "I didn't know you were going to jerk so sudden like that! Don't worry, I have you!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Harry felt himself lifted up again. He lost contact with the warm fur of the Guardian. He was dragged over something rough. And then the hands released him and he lay back against a large rough stone.

The last words he remembered hearing were, Hans, the big, younger man, saying, "You have the brooch?"

"Never fear me losing that!" Finn said.

Then Harry passed out.

When Harry came back to consciousness, he was lying under a light coverlet in a high, wooden-framed bed, propped on big eiderdown pillows. The room was filled with golden daylight, and there was a pleasant smell in the air which he couldn't immediately identify. In a room close to the one he was in, he could hear a young woman singing.

Looking around, he saw he was in a gingerbready sort of room, filled with wooden carvings, some of quaint little gnomes, other more sinister — crude wooden carvings that might have been hacked out with an axe and looked like they represented some ancient, shaggy-haired deities.

He stirred in the bed. A voice behind him called out, "Ah, he's waking up!" This was Finn, the round-cheeked little fellow whom Harry remembered lifted him out of the Guardian's arms at some cost to his own safety.

He turned his head. Finn was seated on a stool behind him. He stood up, and he was no more than four feet tall. He was wearing ancient-looking clothing of brown and green. He wore suspenders, and old-fashioned shoes with silver buckles. He had a small clay pipe clenched in his teeth. He looked to Harry like some old Irish or Germanic or Scandinavian legend come to life.

Another man came in from the other room. Harry vaguely remembered this one, too. It was Hans, big and stalwart, with a square, placid face, ash blond hair cut straight across the forehead. He looked dull-witted but amiable.

They both called out, "Helke, come see, the stranger is awake!"

They pounded each other on the back in congratulation, Hans nearly knocking Finn over. Harry had time to think, "So this is what they do for excitement around here." And then Helke came in.

She could be no more than eighteen or so. And she was beautiful, with long brown hair in which she wore a chaplet of wild flowers. Her beauty

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was all the more striking because of the innocence of her expression. She clapped her hands together. "Oh, you're alive! I'm so glad!"

The three of them joined hands and danced around the room. Then they clustered around the bed again, all of them talking at the same time.

"I saw the Guardian was up to something," Hans said. "He usually doesn't visit us, you know. He stays outside our little valley, and he keeps bad things out. But this time he came right up to the parapet that separates our world from the other one, and I said to myself, 'Ho, something's afoot!' And I went and called Helke."

"I came right away," Helke said, "even though Hans was talking to me. Hans can be something of a nuisance, always wanting to take my attention away from my embroidery. But I saw at once that there was something serious afoot, so I called for Finn, the cobbler, who lives in the next house."

"It's a tumbledown little house, but I love it dearly," Finn said. "I was just sitting in front of the fire, smoking my pipe, with a pot of porridge warming in the coals, when Helke, who is like a daughter to me, came in and told me I must come at once. And so I did. And I saw the Guardian with someone in his arms, standing on the steep mountaintop below the parapet. He was lifting a person up to Hans, and Hans was trying to reach him, but the distance was too great."

"I saw it was a stranger," Helke said, "and I knew we had to do something, because he would perish in the cold, and the Guardian could come no further. This was the first time he had brought a stranger to us."

"I understood at once how it could be done," Finn said. "I told Hans to hold my ankles, and I climbed over the parapet and got a good grip on the stranger here. And even though it was very slippery and dangerous, I managed to pull him up. Yes, and I saved the brooch, too, for I knew the Lady would want to see it."

"And here you are!" Helke cried to Harry. "And you're alive! Wait until the Lady hears of this!"

At mention of the Lady's name, the three sobered up immediately. "Yes," Finn said, "we must tell the Lady, just as soon as she gets back. I hope she won't think we overstepped ourselves."

"Oh, I hope she doesn't think that!" Hans said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I do so hope the stranger can stay with us!" Finn said. "He could be my apprentice. I could teach him to cobble shoes."

"Or I could teach him to be a woodsman," Hans said.

Helke shook her head gravely. "We have only one of each. You know the rule."

They looked at her sorrowfully. There was a long silence. Then Helke said, "Well, it's all in the hands of the Lady. She will decide. For our part, we must let our stranger rest. I am preparing some good chicken soup for him. It will help him grow strong. Stranger, what is your name?"

"Harry," Harry said.

They all repeated the name to themselves several times. At last Helke said, "How exotic!" She turned to the others. "Let Harry rest now, and I will prepare his soup. You can visit him again later."

The two men, Hans, very large and lumbering, Finn, almost a dwarf, left the room, their faces wreathed in smiles. Helke straightened the coverlet over Harry and bent over him, smiling, her face heartbreakingly beautiful. Then she heard a bubbling sound from the kitchen, cried, "My soup!" and hurried away.

Harry lay back contentedly on the big pillows. He had given up any thought of making sense out of all this. He just wanted to lie back and enjoy it. The three — Helke, Hans, and Finn — seemed to him like big children, or like brightly illuminated figures from a child's drawing book. But he was all right with that. How wonderful they were, he thought, and there was a hint of condescension in that thought: they were wonderful children, and he was an adult who could appreciate them.

LATER THAT DAY, after rich chicken soup and a nap, Helke helped Harry to the balcony to give him a look at the Village. He saw what looked like a Walt Disney set for an alpine fantasy — quaint little houses with peaked roofs set into curving cobblestoned streets, people in old-fashioned costumes, everything in bright colors. It was all a little unreal, and, perhaps for that very reason, deeply satisfying. Harry loved this place at once, not least because the alternative was death.

He and Helke ate soup together in the evening, and Finn came by to show off his latest handiwork — boots of a highly polished leather, shaped

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and turned on his own lasts. Harry was glad to see him. He had taken to the little cobbler right away. He was less pleased to see Hans, who came by after Finn, and who hung around for a long time making calf's eyes at Helke.

The Lady was expected every day, but a week passed before she made her appearance. By that time, Harry was in love with Helke. More to the point, she seemed utterly in love with him. She couldn't stand being out of his company. They held hands in the parlor and made impossible plans. And when the Lady appeared again, and sent for Harry, she went to her bedroom and cried.

The Lady lived in a big house in the very center of the Village. It was a beautiful wooden house, painted in cool whites, blues and grays, and with a lot of ornamental woodwork. The windows were high, and were covered with long white curtains.

Helke walked with him as far as the little gate that led to the walk up to the house, and here she stopped.

"Aren't you going in with me?"

She shook her head. "It is not allowed. The Lady asked for you, not for me."

Harry walked up to the front door of the Lady's house. The door opened by itself. He hesitated a moment, then walked in. He was in a hallway. It was dark, but there was a brightening at its far end. He knew he should follow the light and he did so. The light led him to a flight of stairs, and he went up, and then down a corridor, and at last into a room.

There, seated in a straight-backed chair, was the Lady. She was neither young nor old. Harry's first impression was that she was timeless. She was slender and slight. She had long, light-colored hair, and her face was a pointed oval. In her hand was the silver brooch that Anna had given him.

"You got this from my sister, Anna," the Lady said. "When you saw her, was she well?"

"She seemed tired," Harry said. "Maybe not too well. I urged her to come with me to this place of yours. She refused."

The Lady nodded. "She still holds by the original choice she made,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

back when she decided to stay with the life of Earth, and I elected to come here."

"Can you tell me where 'here' is?" Harry asked.

"You won't find my Village on any map. This place exists outside of everything you have ever known."

"Do you mean we're not on the Earth?"

"You're still on the Earth, but it's not the same Earth you've known. This Village is in its own little fold of time and space. You can't get here from the Earth that you know. Except through the Guardian. As you have seen."

Harry was struggling to understand. "How can such a place exist?"

"Places like the Earth exist in many planes of existence, and each plane is sealed off from the others. People of my race are able, under certain circumstances, to move from one plane to another. It is the destiny of my people, the Tuatha dé Danaan, to live very long lives in secret places, together with the humans we bring with us."

"That must confer a great power on you," Harry said.

"It would, if we were humans. But we are not. We are Tuatha, we are not aggressive, we are not ambitious, we have no expansionistic tendencies. We live by simple rules, and we protect those who live with us by those rules, invariably applied. My sister Anna chose to turn away from the ways of our kind. She was attracted to the tumult and splendor of human life, its variety, its immense emotional range, its joys and pathos."

"Tuatha dé Danaan," Harry mused. "I've heard those words before."

"It is one of the words your race has for mine. We are also known as The Little People, the fairies, and many more titles. We have been with humanity since earliest times, but almost always in secret places like this one, hidden away from human life, its changes, its ambitions."

"This place is just what I want," Harry said.

"I'm sorry you've had to come this difficult way in vain," the Lady said. "You will have to leave."

"Hey, wait!" Harry said. "I can fit in!"

"It's not a question of that. Here in the Village the rule is simple, as it is in all Tuatha-ruled places. The rule is, just one of everything necessary. We already have, for example, a cobbler, a woodsman, an embroideress, a cook — "

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"But do you have a pastry chef? What about a master dyer so we could get some other colors in here? I noticed you have only apple and walnut trees. I could introduce some other species. There's a lot I can do that wouldn't be duplicating anything."

The Lady laughed. "That is ingenious. But ingenuity is exactly what we do not want here. I am the one who says what is necessary, and that is what we already have. We don't need anything else. You will have to leave."

"Besides," Harry said. "Helke and I — well, we love each other. I want to stay with her. She wants me."

"I am sorry, that cannot be."

"It isn't fair!" Harry said.

She looked at him curiously. "'Fairness' is such a human concept. We Tuatha don't deal in it at all. Ours is not a universe governed by the terms of morality. We simply follow our rules. Now leave me, Harry. Take the rest of the day to make your preparations. But when tomorrow comes, you must be outside, or I will bring in the Guardian to carry you out."

She handed him Anna's brooch. "Take this. It has not bought you admission."

Helke was sitting in the kitchen, waiting for him when Harry returned. She sprang up as soon as he walked in the door, threw her arms around his neck, kissed him, then kissed him a second time, lingeringly. She sighed and snuggled up close to him, and Harry felt a great wave of affection come over him for this beautiful girl. Their kisses grew more frequent, they began to touch, to stroke, to linger. And then Helke pulled herself away with an evident effort.

"Time for that later! A lot of time! For I love you most dearly, wonderful stranger who has come into my life. But tell me of your talk with the Lady! I'm sure she took pity on you, on both of us, and found a place for you in our Village. Tell me at once that it is so, and relieve my fears."

"If only I could!" Harry said.

"Do you mean she didn't find you a place?"

"She said I would have to leave tomorrow morning."

"Did you tell her about us?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes, I did," Harry said. "She said it couldn't be helped. She said only one of each kind is allowed here."

Helke went to an armchair and sat in it. "Of course she ordered you to go! Why should the Lady care about little Helke's broken heart? Helke is only supposed to do embroidery every day. Not to fall in love. And if Helke discovers love after these endless years of embroidering, well, Helke can just keep her mouth shut about it."

Helke's mouth took a sullen, discontented turn. She looked quite unattractive for a moment. But then she pulled herself together again, and a determined look came into her face.

"It's those rules of hers," Helke explained. "One of everything and nothing more. The same things every day and nothing different. They're well enough when this life is all you know. But when you discover love, as I have, when you fall in love with a living man from the outside world, well, it simply won't do any longer."

"Hey, I don't want to go," Harry said. "It means my death if I go out there."

Helke nodded absently. She wasn't thinking of Harry's life or death just now. She had other things on her mind. Her own life, which she had suddenly became aware of. Her own happiness, which she had lost in the moment of finding it.

Nothing changed in the Village. That was the idea, anyhow. But even in the short time since Harry's arrival, some things had changed. Helke, for example. The lovely, innocent girl had fallen in love with Harry. That had brought about changes in her, not all of them nice ones. She was very affectionate toward him. Harry liked that, though he sometimes found it just a tad tedious. She was peremptory toward Hans, whose love for her was evident, and who seemed to find it natural to do whatever she told him to do.

And Hans had changed, too, though it was difficult to put your finger on exactly how. He looked at Helke in a new way. Interest in her showed in his rather dull face. An awakened lust burned in his china-blue eyes. And Helke used this interest to get Hans to do what she wanted him to do. Hans was willing enough, but there was a cunningness about him now that didn't exactly square with his former straightforward character. He

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

seemed to be waiting for something. Something that would profit him. Without doing anything about it, he was beginning to progress toward his own self-interest.

Only Finn hadn't changed. Or his changes had been innocent, and didn't seem to be leading him anywhere.

"It's unfair," Helke said. "We lived here the same every day, and that was supposed to be best. But now I see it is not so. Now I know love. How am I supposed to go on as before? Perhaps it would have been best if Finn had not been able to reach you...if you had fallen down the mountain. In a way, this was all Finn's fault. And Finn must pay for it."

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked.

"Never mind," Helke said. "I know what must be done. Now come to bed. We have much to do in the morning."

What could she possibly have in mind? Harry didn't want to ask. All he knew was, he didn't want to leave the Village. He didn't want to be lowered down into the snow and ice, and wait until the Guardian came to collect him. If it went that way, what was the best he could expect? To get back to human civilization? Stumble out of the woods into Elizabethtown or Keene. And wait until some other Far Viewer picked him up again.

Helke had something in mind. Harry didn't know what it was, and didn't want to know.

IT WAS SWEET that night in Helke's arms in the big warm bed. The morning of Harry's departure dawned all too soon. Helke dressed, looking grim-faced and determined. She led Harry, together with Hans and Finn, through the Village to the place where the Guardian had first put Harry into Finn's outstretched hands. A group of villagers had come along to watch the festivities — for it was an important day when someone left the Village. The Lady was not there, but this absence was expected — the Lady never attended the matters of the Village.

Helke led Hans aside and did a lot of whispering in his ear. Hans seemed puzzled, but he agreed to what she was saying. Harry wondered what she was up to, but he didn't ask.

Helke said to Finn, "Show everyone how you and Hans rescued the stranger."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The villagers applauded, and Finn said, "I'll be pleased to show it. Hans, take hold of my ankles as you did before."

Held in Hans's strong hands, Finn was lowered over the side of the parapet.

The villagers exclaimed as Hans, his face red, muscles taut, lowered Finn down toward the peak, below which the points of innumerable mountains fell away.

Harry was watching, too, and he couldn't imagine what Helke had in mind, or how she was going to bring it off under the gaze of the entire Village.

At last Helke had Finn and Hans in the position she desired, with Hans gripping his ankles and Finn stretched out to his fullest extent, below him nothing but empty space and cruel pointed rocks.

"Is everyone watching?" Helke asked. "Good! Now I want you all to look up into the sky. What is that I see? An eagle? Or is it a winged man? Can anyone tell me?"

The villagers stared upward dutifully .

Helke said in a low voice, "Now, Hans."

Hans blinked, and needed a moment to wrench his attention from the sky, where he also was looking, back to Helke.

"Do it now!" she commanded him.

Hans grimaced and opened his hands.

Finn fell away in a long keening wail.

"Oh, dear!" Helke cried. "Hans's hands must have fallen asleep. Is that what happened, Hans?"

"Yes, that's what happened," Hans said. "My hands fell asleep. I couldn't keep my grip. And now our dear Finn is gone."

The villagers began to wail and tear their clothing.

"But luckily," Helke told them, "we have Harry here, the one who had been the stranger, but now is known to us, a new man and a good one, and if the Lady agrees, he will take Finn's place as our cobbler, and all will be just as it had been."

Upon hearing that, there was general rejoicing, and the villagers began an impromptu Morris dance.

"That was it?" Harry whispered to Helke. "That was your plan?"

"Yes! Good, wasn't it?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Harry didn't know whether to laugh or cry. At last, all he could say was, "Well, I guess if no one's seen the trick before.... And if no one gets suspicious...."

"Why should anyone be suspicious?"

Harry didn't answer. But he realized that if you lived in a place where no one had ever doubted anyone else's motives before, there was no reason to begin now. Guile needed a while to settle in before it became an habitual pattern or reaction.

But what would the Lady think?

The next day, word was passed that the Lady wanted to see Harry, and he went at once, fearing the worst. But he soon saw that the Lady wasn't going to question the account of Finn's death.

"As you know," she said, "there has been an accident. Finn the cobbler is no longer among us. Do you want to take his place?"

"Yes, Lady, with all my heart I do!"

"Then let it be so."

And so Harry became the Village's new cobbler, and pretty soon it was as if he had always been.

It was more unusual by far when Helke announced that she wanted to marry Harry.

Before this, marriage had been unknown in the Village, as unknown as guile, love, and death.

"Another innovation?" said the Lady.

"A noble institution," Helke said. "And inevitable, once love came in with Harry."

"I wonder what next?" the Lady said.

"I can't imagine," said Helke.

"I can," the Lady said. "And I shudder to think of the next step. I have guarded this Village to the best of my abilities for as long as I have been able. But even I can only delay new things from happening, not stop them entirely. I have never done a marriage before, but they are not forbidden, and I know how to do them."

And so Harry and Helke were married and there was a fine celebration.

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Village and its life went on as before. Not exactly as before, but similarly. Change had come to the Village, and some things were not as they had always been. Hans and Helke, for one thing. The embroidery girl and the big woodsman were in each other's company at all hours of the day and night. More than was seemly...if you were a person who thought of such things. But of course, the only person suspicious of what they might be doing together was Harry. The rest of the Village hadn't progressed that far.

The villagers had become surprisingly sophisticated in some other matters, however. Soon, a deputation of villagers came to the Lady. "We'd like to open up commerce with the outer world," their spokesman said.

"Why should you want that?" the Lady asked.

"To serve the new principle."

"And what is that?"

"The profit motive, Lady!"

"I never even noticed its arrival."

"It came in with Harry, and shortly after death and love and marriage. It is a beautiful thing, Lady. It means ownership of many things."

"I don't advise it," the Lady said. "But if you insist...."

"Lady, most respectfully, we insist."

"I will consider it," the Lady said.

Harry thought it wouldn't be long before she gave in. He saw that it was inevitable, and that he was responsible. In lending himself to Helke's scheme, although he had done so passively, he was as guilty as she. He had gained a momentary safety, but lost the enchantment that made life worthwhile.

Now there were strangers in the Village. With the Lady's permission, the burgomaster had arranged small tours for very special and rich people from Earth.

Soon enough, Harry knew, the villagers would get their connection to the outside world. After that, they'd have a ski lift in the Village, and there would be stores selling souvenir gnomes of painted china looking just like Finn — venerated now as a Village ancestor. These china Finns were to be sold to strangers with unknown motives.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

How quickly it's all changing, Harry thought, sitting in Helke's little parlor, turning Anna's brooch over in his hands and listening to Helke and Hans giggling upstairs in the bedroom. But of course, he was still alive. That had been the whole point of coming to this place. That was all that really mattered, wasn't it?

He frowned. It seemed to him that something else had mattered, or could have mattered, something he'd had a glimpse of, then lost. But he had forgotten what it was.

He shook his head irritably. Strangers in town. People with unknown motives. It wasn't safe here anymore. It was time to get out. *But where to go?*

Coming Attractions

In the overcommercialized world of mass entertainment, we here at *F&SF* can relate to the robot on this month's cover, guarding the beach although no swimmers remain. Fortunately those voices we hear, the ones crying out for more writers of singular vision, aren't hallucinations (unlike those that haunt the robot).

Next month we plan to celebrate a writer of singular vision and powerful voice, an artist whose stories and nonfiction have graced our pages more than a dozen times since 1969. A dozen? Barry N. Malzberg has contributed more than *seven* dozen stories and columns over the years, and next month he'll add to that number with a terrific new essay on the joys and angst of working in the fee-reading department of the Scott Meredith Literary Agency. We'll also have two classic reprints from Mr. Malzberg, contributions from John Kessel and Daniel P. Dern, a clever cover by Walter Velez, and much more. This issue looks to be a good one—don't miss it.

In months ahead, we've got a new "Marionettes" novella by Adam-Troy Castro for you, along with smart buses, unusual aeroplanes, angry dragons, and a very heavy canary. These oddities are contributed by the likes of Jerry Oltion, Pat Murphy, Jack Cady, Terry Bisson, and you'll be seeing some new names in our pages soon. If you don't subscribe already, be sure to send in a card or subscribe online at www.fsfmag.com to make sure that you don't miss any of these goodies.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fantasy&ScienceFiction MARKET PLACE

BOOKS-MAGAZINES

S-F FANTASY MAGAZINES, BOOKS. 96 page Catalog. $5.00. Collections purchased (large or small). Robert Madle, 4406 Bestor Dr., Rockville, MD 20853.

TIMESHIFT TRILOGY: A unique new time travel series *www.scifi-jackson.com*

CRANK! magazine—back issues available. Le Guin, Fintushel, Lethem. Write Broken Mirrors Press, PO Box 1110, New York, NY 10159-1110.

THE ANTHONY BOUCHER CHRONICLES, ed. by Francis M. Nevins, Jr. Mystery reviews and articles from 1942-1947. Books 1 and 2 of the trilogy are available from Ramble House. Book 3 coming this summer. *http://www .ramblehouse.bigstep.com/* 318-868-8727.

14-time Hugo nominee. The New York Review of Science Fiction. *www.nyrsf.com* Reviews and essays. $3.50 or $32 for 12 issues, checks only. Dragon Press, PO Box 78, Pleasantville, NY 10570.

The Burden of Indigo signed by Gene O'Neill $15 ppd. 236 Stonecrest, Napa, CA 94558

A demon warrior's quest to destroy the source of evil. *Swords of Destiny. http://www.swordsofdestiny.com* 1-888-280-7715.

Cat in Glass by Nancy Etchemendy—see *www.cricketbooks.net* for publisher's discount.

Beyond the Time Machine, by Burt Libe, sequel to *The Time Machine. http://us.geocities.com/BTTM_Book*

The Magic Flute (ISBN 0-9674994-0-2) A fantasy novel, with some dragons and no elves, begun in the dark beyond midnight because there are some things we try to hide even from ourselves. *http://www.amazon.com/*

A NERD'S GUIDE TO PEOPLE Reviewers wanted! For free review copy, e-mail bobstet@rcn.com.

Across the Threshold. A science fiction novel. Join me, Carl Kester, as I step across the threshold into a world of adventure and romance. US $13.00, in Canada C$17.00, all other countries US $17.00, postpaid. Available from: J. Bode, PO Box 328, Markham, ON L3P 3J8 Canada. *www.stewartbooks.com*

NEW LEIGH BRACKETT COLLECTION *Martian Quest: The Early Brackett* $40 + $5 s/h to: HAFFNER PRESS, 5005 Crooks Road Suite 35, Royal Oak, MI 48073-1239, *www.haffnerpress.com*

The Silent Man Called, a sword & sorcery adventure by Wade Tarzia. Available as E-book/PDF download $4.95 or quality trade paperback $11.50 *www.1stBooks.com/bookview/12968*

James P. Blaylock, *Thirteen Phantasms,* sixteen stories, $25.00. Books by Michael Bishop, Gwyneth Jones and Garry Kilworth also available. Edgewood Press, PO Box 380264, Cambridge, MA 02238

BACK ISSUES OF F&SF: Issues from 1989-1995 are growing very scarce—fill the gaps in your collection while you can. Send for free list: F&SF, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

Small-press authors! Get the word out with a classified ad in *F&SF!*

MISCELLANEOUS

AUDIOBOOKS. Niven, LeGuin, Willis, Baxter, Egan, etc. *www.audiotexttapes.com.*

PLASTIC MODELS: Space, Sci-Fi, tv, movies, etc. Free catalog, also buying/trading. Green's, Dept. FSF, Box 55787, Riverside, CA 92517. (909) 684-5300; (800) 807-4759; Fax (909) 684-8819; *fsf@greenmodels.com; www.greenmodels.com*

POSTERS of two special F&SF Covers by Kent Bash, "The Auschwitz Circus" (June 1996) and "Dragons" (Feb 1997). 18" x 24", printed on high quality poster paper. $14.95 each, 2 for $25 from F&SF, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

F&SF classifieds work because the cost is low: only $1.50 per word (minimum of 10 words). 10% discount for 6 consecutive insertions, 15% for 12. You'll reach 100,000 high-income, highly educated readers each of whom spends hundreds of dollars a year on books, magazines, games, collectibles, audio and video tapes. Send copy and remittance to: F&SF Market Place, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CURIOSITIES

ROCKET TO THE MORGUE, BY ANTHONY BOUCHER (1942)

ANTHONY Boucher (William Anthony Parker White) was something of a polymath, proud of his expertise on Gregorian chant. Under the pen name H. H. Holmes, he wrote mysteries of the genteel sort that prevailed until Hammett and Chandler darkened the genre. Later, with J. Francis McComas, he became a founding editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction.*

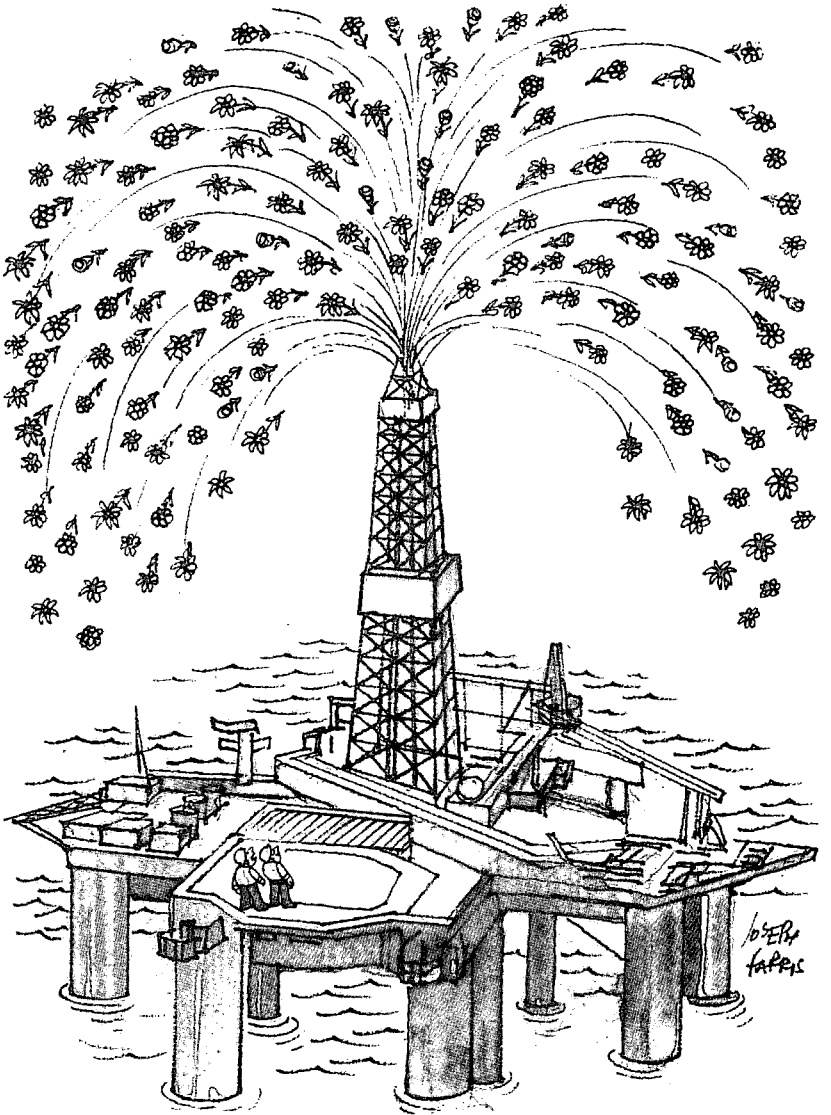
He was a regular at the Mañana Literary Society, the weekly gathering of science fiction people in Robert Heinlein's home in Hollywood. He knew science fiction, and *Rocket* is a roman à clef, set in Los Angeles on the eve of Pearl Harbor. The characters are thinly masked members of the society, and the novel is a revealing picture of science fiction in "the golden age," when John W. Campbell's *Astounding* and *Unknown* were the major magazines. The plot reflects the seamy side of those harsher times when science fiction was still a wood-pulp genre, scorned by the literary establishment.

In an article to be published in *The Pulpster,* Rex W. Layton identifies the characters. Campbell is there as "Don Stuart," Heinlein as the star of his stable, Julius Schwartz as the first agent in the field, Hugo Gernsback, for whom the "Hugos" are named, L. Ron Hubbard in the years before he invented Dianetics and Scientology. There are even the heirs of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, whose hero, Dr. Challenger, discovered "The Lost World."

I was there myself. The article led me on a nostalgic time trip back to the half-forgotten childhood of science fiction.

—Jack Williamson

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



"It's a significant strike but still somewhat disappointing."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Worlds of Wonder—only $32.97
Subscribe now and save 26%

For little more than the price of a hardcover book, we'll take you into the future with more than 1800 pages of compelling fiction and features: stories by both superstar and rising-star writers, along with lively and informative departments on Books, Science and Films. Your subscription will include a special anniversary double issue, which alone has over 100,000 words of new short stories and novellas. And if you subscribe now, you'll pay only $32.97; that's a savings of $11.92, or 26% off the newsstand rate

☐ **Send me one year at the special low rate of $32.97. I save $11.92 off the newsstand price.**

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ ST ___ Zip _____

Outside the US add $10 postage. Make checks payable in US dollars drawn on a US bank. Allow 6 weeks for delivery of first issue. We publish 11 issues a year, including a double Oct/Nov anniversary issue.

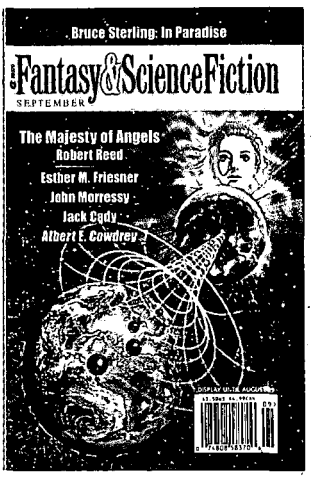
☐ Payment enclosed ☐ Bill me

☐ Charge my MasterCard/Visa

☐ New ☐ Renewal

Acct No._____

Exp. date _____



SUBSCRIBE ONLINE AT WWW.FSFMAG.COM

Fantasy&ScienceFiction

PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED